

Numbers

The Hebrew title of the book of Numbers comes from the fifth word in the book, *bammidbar*, translated “in the wilderness.” This is appropriate since the Israelites spent most of the time covered in this narrative wandering in the wilderness. The more familiar English title, “Numbers,” comes from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), which had as the title *Arithmoi*, referring to the two censuses of the Israelites, which Moses recorded in Numbers 1 and 26. Numbers is the sequel to Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus in the Torah.¹

The first word of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has a prefix—the Hebrew letter *waw*. This is called a *waw*-consecutive, which creates a conjunction with the meaning of “and” or “and the.” This means that they were meant to be read as the sequel to Genesis—and sequentially from there.

Numbers was written by Moses after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and their forty years in the wilderness. Though many dispute Moses as the author of the Torah, Scriptures affirm his authorship (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; Num. 33:1-2; Deut. 31:9; Josh. 1:8; 2 Kgs. 21:8). Jesus Christ also attributed authorship to Moses (Matt. 19:8; Mark 7:10; Luke 18:29-31; 20:37; 24:27; John 7:19).²

Setting

Genesis began by revealing Yahweh as unique and sovereign creator over all creation. Yahweh created humanity as His image bearers to rule and subdue creation and to dwell with Him. Yet, humanity lost this intimate relationship with Yahweh when they chose self-autonomy over obeying Yahweh. However, because Yahweh is also a loving and covenantal God, He chose Abraham and His descendants in order to work out His plan of redemption for all of humanity and creation. Yahweh promised to give them land, to make them a great nation, to bless them, and to make them a blessing to the whole earth. Yahweh’s ultimate goal was to make Abraham into the great nation of Israel, which would serve Him by becoming a righteous people who would represent Him as His image so that they could bless the entire world by restoring the world back to what was lost in the garden.

The book of Exodus begins with the narrator showing that the family of Jacob (the descendants of Abraham), which had entered Egypt at the end of Genesis, had grown into a great multitude, just as Yahweh had promised Abraham in Genesis. However, this people group had also become slaves in Egypt and had begun to take on the identity of Egypt and the worship of their gods. In response, Yahweh called Moses out of the wilderness in order to go back to Egypt, to deliver His people from bondage, and to bring them to Mount Sinai where they would be brought into the presence of Yahweh and officially become His chosen nation. It is here that Yahweh gave

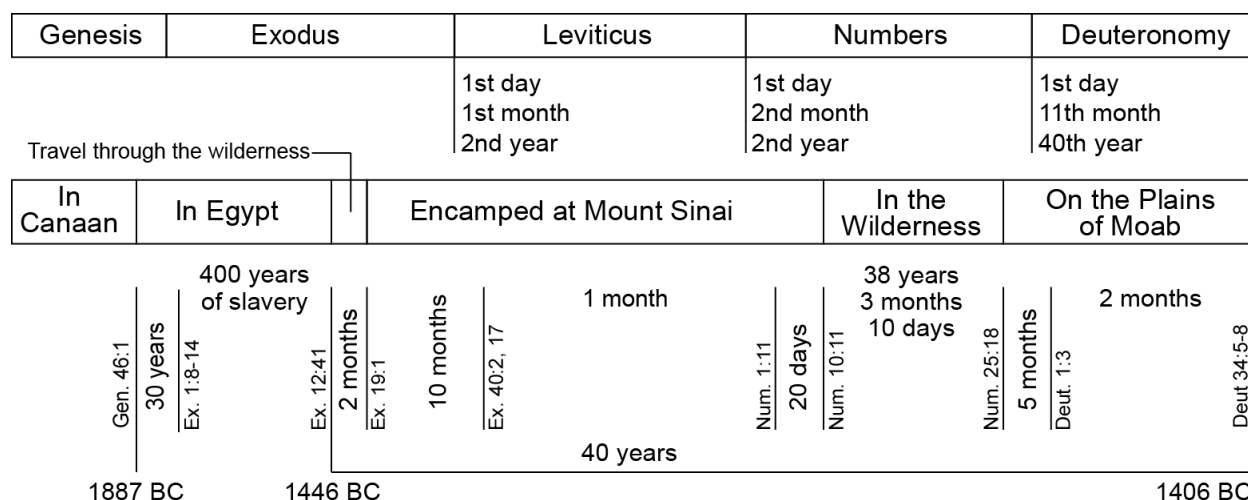
¹ *Torah* is the Hebrew name for the first five books of the New Testament. The name means “teachings” or “instructions” and was considered the foundational teachings of the Jewish faith and, later, the Christian faith. The purpose of the Torah is to teach that people can experience Yahweh’s blessing by trusting Him and by obeying His will.

² Jesus Christ did not specifically say that Moses wrote Exodus, but in His day Jews regarded the Torah as a whole unit and recognized Moses as its author. Thus, they would have understood what Jesus said about any of the five books of Moses as an affirmation of Moses’ authorship of them all. Oswald T. Allis’s *The Five Books of Moses* is a rebuttal of the denial that Moses wrote the Torah. No one has discredited it, though liberal scholars have ignored it.

them the Law and the instructions for the tabernacle. The Law would reveal Yahweh's righteous standards by which they were to live so that they could be the image of God to the world. The tabernacle would be a means for Yahweh to dwell with His people and guide them. This is the beginning of the restoration of the garden.

The book of Leviticus begins with Israel's being unable to enter the tabernacle because of their sin of worshiping the golden calf (Ex. 40:34-35). Even though Yahweh had forgiven Israel, they were still defiled by their sin. Those who are unclean and unholy cannot enter the presence of Yahweh. The book of Leviticus contains the instructions for the sacrificial system and the revealing of the rest of Yahweh's Law. It is here that Israel learned what it meant to be clean and unclean, holy and common, along with the means to become clean and holy after one had become defiled by sin or death.

Numbers records the events of Israel encamped at Mount Sinai in the second month of the second year after Israel had departed from Egypt (see chart below). They have spent the last year here receiving the Law, building the tabernacle, and establishing the sacrificial system. Now, after completing the tabernacle (Ex. 40:17) and having been purified of their sins through the sacrificial system, they are ready to leave for the Promised Land of Canaan. Numbers covers the preparations for entering Canaan and Israel's lack of faith to enter the land. This lack of faith resulted in their judgment of wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The book ends forty years later, the older generation having died and the new generation ready to enter the land (Deut. 1:3).



Purpose

Numbers focuses on the Promised Land and Israel's journey toward it. Even though Israel's wanderings cover the majority of the forty years written about in Numbers, Moses skimmed over the events of those years fairly quickly. Yahweh's emphasis is on Israel's preparations for entering Canaan and their receiving of the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-4). Thus, the purpose of the book is to show how Yahweh dealt with and prepared His people to enter Canaan, to take control of the land, and to represent Him in the midst of the foreign nations.

A secondary purpose of the book is to show the necessity of trusting and obeying Yahweh in order to receive His covenant blessings. Numbers tells of Israel's constant lack of belief that Yahweh could provide for them and ultimately lead them to a land of rest in the fulfillment of His promises. Because Israel failed to trust Yahweh and enter the land in obedience, an entire generation failed to receive the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, and the blessings were postponed until the next, more faithful generation.

In addition to this, Numbers shows that the people's unfaithfulness could not frustrate Yahweh's plans for the people any more than their enemies could. Despite their lack of faith and a series of judgments, Yahweh faithfully brought the next generation into the Promised Land. Though individuals may miss out on the blessings of Yahweh due to their lack of faith, Yahweh is always faithful to care for His covenant people and to bless those who trust Him.

Themes

Many themes are developed throughout the book of Numbers, but the main ones relate to the Promised Land, Israel's lack of faith, and Yahweh's mercy despite Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant.

The Promised land of Canaan

As mentioned in the purpose, Yahweh had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:8; 26:3; 28:13; Num. 14:16; 32:7, 9, 11). But the Canaanites were living in the land, and by the end of the book Abraham's family not only did not have the land but they were living in Egypt. Exodus and Numbers tell of Israel's journey to the land. If Israel was to enter and take the land of Canaan, they had to first be a righteous nation so that they could drive out the ungodly Canaanites from the land and destroy their pagan altars and practices. Yahweh alone was to be worshiped in the land (Num. 33:51-52). And only Yahweh's presence ensured that it would be a land of blessing (Num. 13:27; 14:8) wherein the people would multiply and enjoy life (Lev. 26:3-10; Num. 24:5-7). The land of Canaan was to be holy, sanctified by Yahweh for dwelling among His people (Lv. 26:11-12; Num. 35:34). And the land was to be Israel's permanent possession. (Ge. 13:15; 17:8; Lev. 25; Num. 36). Everything in the story drives Israel to the land that Yahweh had promised them.

The Need for Obedience

In order to receive the land of Canaan and be blessed by Yahweh, Israel had to be holy like He is holy (Lev. 19:2; 20:26). The principle that Israel should imitate Yahweh is seen very clearly in the book of Numbers. Individually and corporately, Israel was to express the character of Yahweh their redeemer. They were to be unified just as Yahweh was one (Num. 32). In the census listing (Num. 1:3; 26:2), every tribe had to provide spies (Num. 13:2) and men for war (Num. 31:4). Only when Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh agreed to provide fighting men to fight the battles on the west side of the Jordan River were they permitted to live on the east side of the Jordan River (Num. 32:1-33). Each tribe indicated its support in the building of the tabernacle and offered exactly the same amount of offerings to build it (Num. 7).

Yet Israel demonstrated that not only could they not be righteous like Yahweh but that they did not even trust in Him or His promises. After the continual rebellion of the people recorded in the book of Exodus, Moses continued to record this rebellion in the book of Numbers. But what is emphasized more than the rebellion are the consequences of the rebellion. The people constantly

incurred the wrath of Yahweh and thus heaped judgment on themselves in the form of plagues, defeat by enemies, and even death. But all of this reaches its climax in Num. 14, when the people refused to enter the land of Canaan due to their unbelief in Yahweh's ability to give them the land. The major point of this event is not just the punishment that they received for their rebellion but what they did not receive. Because of their rebellion against Yahweh, they would not receive the rest in the land promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. In the end, they would not experience life in the fullest but eventually death. Yahweh made it clear to the Israelites that if they obeyed Him, they would experience life to the fullest (Lev. 18:5). Numbers, therefore, shows the need for obedience in order to experience life and the blessings of Yahweh through the negative example of a generation who, due to their disobedience, did not experience life.

Though Yahweh promised Israel the land of Canaan, He also made it clear that if they were disobedient to Him, they would be punished in the same way that the Canaanites were by being exiled from the land (Deut. 28). Israel's lack of faith and loss of entering the land in Numbers 14 was a taste of what Israel could expect on larger scale of exile if they continued in disbelief and disobedience.

The Mercy of Yahweh

Despite the people's disobedience, Yahweh still showed mercy to the people over and over through the countless times that Moses interceded on their behalf. The fact that Yahweh did not abandon the people but disciplined them shows that His desire is to teach them and help them grow. And even though some died due to their rebellion, they were few in comparison to the entire nation that could have died, and Yahweh offered forgiveness when the people repented. Thus, the next generation would be far more faithful because of the lessons they had learned through the lives and mistakes of their parents. And just as Yahweh had promised exile if Israel continued in disobedience, He also made a pledge to ultimately restore them to the land (Lev. 26:40-45; Deut. 30:1-10), which can be seen in His faithfulness to bring them to the land at the end of Numbers.

Structure

Numbers is a combination of both laws and narrative of Israel's time in the wilderness. The history provides the setting and framework for the laws. It is the history that gives meaning and understanding to the laws. The laws are not just commandments on how to live but also promises of Yahweh as He puts Israel in situations wherein they can fulfill the laws.

The laws and narratives are concerned with Israel's journey toward Canaan. The laws dictate how Israel was to travel as an organized army of Yahweh to the Promised Land and what they were to do when they arrived there (Num. 1-10; 28-30; 34-36). The narratives describe the turns, obstacles, and testings in their journey (Num. 11-14; 20-21).

Unlike the other books of the Torah, which are structured according to themes, the book of Numbers is structured according to geography. The book can be divided into three major geographical locations. First is their time at Mount Sinai, where they had received the law and then made preparations to leave the wilderness and enter Canaan (Num. 1:1-10:10). Second is their journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, where they failed to enter the land and thus had to wander for forty years (Num. 10:11-20:21). Third is their journey to the Plains of Moab, where the previous generation died off along the way and the next generation entered the land.

Outline

- I. Preparations for Departure from Sinai (1:1–10:10)
 - A. Numbering and Organization of the Tribes (1:1–4:49)
 - B. Special Legislation (5:1–6:27)
 - C. The Dedication of the Tabernacle and Priest (7:1–10:10)
- II. From Sinai to Kadesh Barnea (10:11–19:22)
 - A. Grumbling and Unrest (10:11–12:16)
 - B. The Report of the Twelve Spies (13:1–14:45)
 - C. Supplemental Laws (15:1–41)
 - D. Rebellion of Korah and Others (16:1–17:13)
 - E. Duties of Priests and Levites (18:1–19:22)
- III. From Kadesh Barnea to the Plains of Moab (20:1–36:13)
 - A. Moses' Sin and the Death of Miriam and Aaron (20:1–29)
 - B. The Defeat of Arad, Sihon, and Og (21:1–35)
 - C. Balak and Balaam (22:1–24:25)
 - D. Israel's Idolatry and Sin with the Moabite Women (25:1–18)
 - E. Second Numbering of Israel and Inheritance (26:1–27:23)
 - F. The Festivals and Making Vows (28:1–30:16)
 - G. War Against Midian (31:1–54)
 - H. The Boundaries and Allotment of Canaan (32:1–34:29)
 - I. Levitical Cities and Cities of Refuge (35:1–34)
 - J. Inheritance Case of Zelophehad's Daughters Revisited (36:1–13)

I. Preparations for Departure from Sinai (1:1–10:10)

The opening chapters are not arranged in chronological order. Num. 1-6 are dated by Num. 1:1 to the first day of the second month. Num. 7:1-9:15 fall between the first and fourteenth day of the first month (Ex. 40:2). Num. 1-6 were probably placed first to explain the significance of Num. 7:1-9:15.

These chapters cover fifty days. They show how the holiness principles of Leviticus were put into practice. The symbolism of the tabernacle's layout is very important. Yahweh in the middle, surrounded by the Levites, then the Israelites, and then the unclean outside the camp. Both at rest and on the move, it was structured to communicate the kingship and holiness of Yahweh.

Now that Israel was a nation and knew what was expected of them, Yahweh organized them around Himself—the tabernacle, which contained His Shekinah glory—and prepared them for their journey to the Promised Land. Israel received their final instructions on what it meant to be clean before Yahweh.

“...just as the way from Goshen to Sinai was a preparation of the chosen people for their reception into the covenant with God, so the way from Sinai to Canaan was also a preparation for the possession of the Promised Land.”³

“The purpose of the writer is to show that at this point in the narrative, Israel's leaders, Moses and Aaron, were following God's will and the people were following them obediently. This theme will not continue long, however. The narrative will soon turn a corner and begin to show that the people quickly deviated from God's way and, with their leaders, Moses and Aaron, failed to continue to trust in God.”⁴

A. The Numbering and Organization of the Tribes (1:1–4:49)

Looking at the census, the reader sees four important biblical principles. First, Yahweh shows that He is a God of order, not chaos. In the same way that Genesis begins with the beginning and ordering of creation and the days of the week, so also Numbers begins with the beginning and ordering of the nation of Israel. Second, Yahweh shows that He has been faithful to His promise in the Abrahamic Covenant to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars and to make them into a great nation (Gen. 12:1-4; 15:4-5). By counting the people, He shows that they have indeed become a great nation just as He promised. Third, every member of the people of Yahweh had role to play. Everyone was counted and everyone was assigned a task to accomplish in service to their divine king. Fourth, Israel was a hierarchy of holiness within the theocracy of Yahweh's kingdom.⁵

“The two censuses (chs. 1-4, 26) are key to understanding the structure of the book. The first census (chs. 1-4) concerns the first generation of the Exodus community; the second census (ch. 26) focuses on the experiences of the second generation, the people for whom this book is primarily directed. The first generation of the redeemed were prepared for triumph but ended in disaster. The second generation has an opportunity for greatness—if only they will

³ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 3:1.

⁴ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 376.

⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, pp. 83-84.

learn from the failures of their fathers and mothers the absolute necessity for robust faithfulness to the Lord despite all obstacles.”⁶

1:1-46 Exodus ended with Moses’ inability to enter the tabernacle where Yahweh dwelt (Ex. 40:34-35) because of Israel’s sin with the golden calf (Ex. 32). Thus, Leviticus begins with “Then Yahweh called to Moses and spoke to him *from* the Meeting Tent” (Lev. 1:1) because Israel was unclean. Through Yahweh’s instructions on the sacrificial system and purity laws in Leviticus, Israel could become cleansed and return to a state of clean. Thus, Numbers begins with Moses’ ability to enter the tabernacle where Yahweh was (Num. 1:1).

The Hebrew word for wilderness is *midbar* and means “a place for driving flocks.” It is not a completely arid desert, but it does contain a little vegetation and some trees. The rain amounts to only a few inches each year, which is too little to allow for cultivation of the land.

Now, after a year after Israel’s departure from Egypt, Israel was equipped with the Law, the tabernacle, and the sacrificial system and was ready to make the departure for the Promised Land. The last remaining task was that Yahweh wanted Israel to take a census of the people, and then He would instruct them on how to organize themselves around the tabernacle while camping and in formation while traveling.

Moses had taken another census nine months earlier (Ex. 30:11-16; 38:25-26). The purpose of the previous census was to determine how many adult males owed atonement money. This made it clear to Israel that they belonged to Yahweh and were in service to Him as their covenant king who had bought and delivered them from enslavement to a corrupt Egyptian king.

The purpose of this census was to count all the people over twenty years old who were able to serve in the army. The reason was that they were off to the Promised Land where they would be driving out the Canaanites from the land. Thus, the whole organization of Israel around the tabernacle was that of a holy army in service of Yahweh, their divine military king. On this occasion, it was far more detailed with the people being listed by families, fathers’ houses, and according to the number of names. The word “families” would better be translated as “clan.” Everyone was counted because everyone had to support the war effort. To opt out due to doubt or fear was a great sin (Num. 14; Deut. 20:3-4, 8).

In this census, the Levites were exempt since they were not to fight in wars but to serve as priests. The final count was 603,550 men, which is a large number even by today’s standards. The fact that the number of men in each tribe ends in zero may mean that Moses rounded the numbers.⁷

The narrator lists the number of men who left Israel that day as 603,550. This would only have included men over the age of 21 and not the men who were too old. Thus, considering that most of them would have had a wife and at least two children, and then including the older people, the total number of Israelites involved in the exodus would have surpassed two million. This is a

⁶ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 701.

⁷ For a summary of the ways commentators have sought to explain the very large census numbers as much smaller, see R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 631-64; Allen, pp. 680-91; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, pp. 6-9; Wenham, pp. 60-66; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, pp. 60-66; or David M. Fouts, “A Defense of the Hyperbolic Interpretation of Large Numbers in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:3 (September 1997): 377-87. Wenham, p. 66, concluded, “In short, there is no obvious solution to the problems posed by these census figures.” See also John W. Wenham, “The Large Numbers in the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967): 19-53. I believe we should take the numbers literally (cf. 22:3-6).

very large number that is hard to make work in other parts of the Scriptures. First, this means that Pharaoh's army would have had to be huge in comparison, which does not fit with the Egyptian records of that time nor the size of any army in modern times. Second, it is hard to imagine this many people with all their livestock and carts crossing the Red Sea in less than one night. Third it is hard to imagine that many people surviving in the wilderness with women and children and the constant need for food and water. Fourth, the Bible says there were seven nations in the land of Canaan mightier than Israel. Given what we know about Canaan during this time, it is not likely that seven Canaanite nations surpassed two million people. Fifth, two million people would not have been able to fit in the valley of Moab east of Jericho before they crossed into the Canaan. Sixth Yahweh said that He could not give them the land of Canaan immediately after the exodus because there were not enough of them to maintain the land and to prevent the wild animals too numerous for them to handle (Ex. 23:29).

However, we must take the text seriously and read it for what it says. The Hebrew word for “thousands” is *'elep* and can be translated as “thousand, tribe, clan, family, division, or cattle.” Scholars have thus made many attempts to reduce the number by seeing it as six hundred *clans*, *families*, or *divisions*, instead of six hundred *thousand* men. The word translated “men” comes from the Hebrew word *ragli*, and Douglas Stuart argues that it is never used of men in the First Testament but always of soldiers, meaning that this should be seen as military divisions, as in Ex. 12:41. A division in the ancient Near East was 12–15 men, putting the number of men around 7,200 instead of 603,550. Then, the total number of Israelites would be around 28,800 to 36,000 instead of two million. This is much more reasonable and still true to the authenticity of the text.⁸ However, other scholars have pointed out difficulties with this understanding that may or may not be valid. All scholars struggle with this data, and the numbers of people in the ancient world are simply not clear. In the end, we do not really know the number of Israelites given the data that we have at this point.

1:47-54 Yahweh did not allow the Levites to be numbered in the first part of this census because they were not allowed to fight in the army since they belonged in the service of the tabernacle. Their job here was to take care of the tabernacle and its article. They were to maintain the tabernacle, pack up and carry its items when on the march, and set up the tabernacle when making camp.

Even though the Levites were exempt from going to war, they were still seen as warriors and protectors of the tabernacle and of its holiness. Yahweh commanded that only the Levites were to take care of and transport the tabernacle and that if anyone not authorized tried to enter the tabernacle, the Levites were to kill him or her in the same way they did after the golden calf incident (Ex. 32:25-29). Only an Israelite by birth or a non-Israelite who renounced his or her pagan gods and entered the Abrahamic Covenant (God Fearer) was allowed to enter the courtyard, with a sacrifice, and only the priests were allowed to enter the tabernacle itself. Part of protecting the tabernacle meant that the Levites were to camp around the tabernacle as a buffer between the tabernacle and the tribes of Israel—to protect Israel from the anger of Yahweh that would fall on them as sinners who came too close to the holiness of the tabernacle.

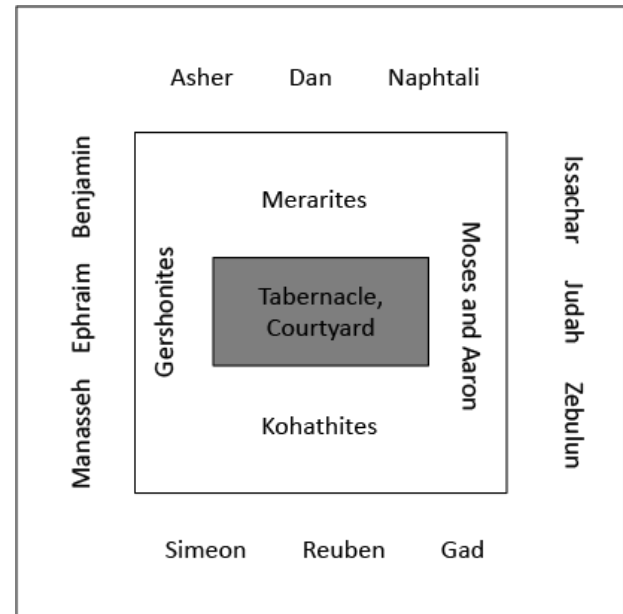
The census ends with the statement “The Israelites did according to all that Yahweh commanded Moses—that is what they did” to emphasize their obedience to His commands. On multiple

⁸ See Douglas K. Stuart. *Exodus*, pp. 297-302.

occasions throughout this first section Numbers makes it clear that Moses obeyed and did everything that Yahweh told him to do (Ex 1:54; 3:33-34; 4:42; Heb. 3:5).

2:1-31 After the tribes had been numbered, Yahweh then instructed them as to where they were to set up camp around the tabernacle according to the emblems of their families. They were also to camp at a distance from the tabernacle to leave room for the Levites to camp between them and the tabernacle.

In the center of the Israelite camp would be the tabernacle; camped around the tabernacle on all four sides were the Levites, set as a barrier between the tabernacle and the people. Yahweh then set three tribes on each of the four sides of the tabernacle. Judah was to be the leader of the eastern camp, which included Issachar and Zebulun. The front of the tabernacle was the eastern side, where the gate was and where Judah, the head tribe of the nation, was camped (Gen. 49:8-12).



“Further, the placement on the east is very significant in Israel’s thought. East is the place of the rising of the sun, the source of hope and sustenance. Westward was the sea. Israel’s traditional stance was with its back to the ocean and the descent of the sun. The ancient Hebrews were not a sea-faring people like the Phoenicians and the Egyptians. For Israel the place of pride was on the east. Hence there we find the triad of tribes headed by Judah, Jacob’s fourth son and father of the royal house that leads to King Messiah.”⁹

“...the Genesis narratives devote much attention to the notion of ‘the east,’ a theme that also appears important in the arrangement of the tribes. After the Fall, Adam and Eve, and then Cain, were cast out of God’s good land ‘toward the east’ (3:24; 4:16). Furthermore, Babylon was built in the east (Ge 11:2), and Sodom was ‘east’ of the Promised Land (13:11). Throughout these narratives the hope is developed that God’s redemption would come from the east and that this redemption would be a time of restoration of God’s original blessing and gift of the land in Creation. Thus, God’s first act of preparing the land—when he said, ‘Let there be light’ (1:3)—used the imagery of the sunrise in the east as a figure of the future redemption. Moreover, God’s garden was planted for humankind ‘in the east’ of Eden (2:8), and it was there that God intended to pour out his blessing on them.”¹⁰

“Throughout the pentateuchal narratives, then, the concept of moving ‘eastward’ plays an important role as a reminder of the Paradise Lost—the garden in the east of Eden—and a reminder of the hope for a return to God’s blessing ‘from the east’—the place of waiting in

⁹ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 715.

¹⁰ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 371-72.

the wilderness. It was not without purpose, then, that the arrangement of the tribes around the tabernacle should reflect the same imagery of hope and redemption.”¹¹

Reuben was to be the leader of the southern camp, which included Simeon and Gad. Ephraim was to be the leader of the western camp, which included Manasseh and Benjamin. Dan was to be the leader of the northern tribe, which included Asher and Naphtali.

This camp was set up in a large square around the tabernacle. In the center of the camp was enthroned Yahweh as their holy and righteous king. The Levites were His priests and holy guards. And the tribes were His army ready for war. This was much like how the Egyptian king set up his armies around himself.

“The Egyptians characteristically placed the tent of the king, his generals, and officers at the center of a large army camp, but for the Israelites another tent was central: the sanctuary in which it placed God to dwell among his people. From him proceeds the power to save and to defend, and from this tent in the middle he made known his ever-saving will.”¹²

It is also important to note that unlike like the pagan gods of the other nations, who dwelt upon mountains or at distances from their people, Yahweh chose to come down as their divine king and dwell among them, in the midst of them. This was the sovereign king of the universe who also wanted unity and a relationship with them.

When Israel packed up and moved, the eastern camp, with Judah leading, was to go ahead of the nation, followed by the southern camp. Behind them were the Levites with the Ark of the Covenant and the packed-up tabernacle; the western and northern camps brought up the rear. Even on the move, Yahweh sat in the center of the camp as their king going into battle.

Each of the four camps was to be represented by the standard of their lead tribe. The images of the standards of the 12 tribes have been lost throughout history, yet rabbinical tradition has maintained the four lead tribes of the four camps.¹³ From what scholars can tell, the images of the 12 tribes were based on the twelve Zodiac signs¹⁴ and the blessings of Jacob in Gen. 49. The standard of Judah was the lion, of Reuben was the man, of Ephraim was an ox, and of Dan was originally the serpent but later (during Israel’s wanderings) was changed to the eagle with a serpent in its mouth. These images are the same four faces of the cherubim that carried the throne and glory of Yahweh in Ezekiel’s vision and, later, John’s vision (Ezek. 1:10; Rev. 4:7). This suggests that there may be something to the rabbinical traditions, yet we cannot be completely confident. These are also the images of the four gospels of the Second Testament. Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the Messiah and king of Israel (lion); Mark portrays Him as the suffering servant of the Israel (ox); Luke portrays Him as the perfect man (man); and John portrays Him as fully divine (eagle). Thus, Israel on earth, the cherubim in heaven, and the four gospels of Yahweh’s Word all bear these images as a reflection and testimony of Christ.

2:32-34 Notice that technically there were 13 tribes of Israel even though the Bible consistently refers to “the twelve tribes of Israel.” This is because typically Levi was not counted as one of

¹¹ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 371-72.

¹² B. Maarsingh. *Numbers: A Practical Commentary*, p. 15.

¹³ See C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 3:17.

¹⁴ There is much evidence supporting the Zodiac originally being given by Yahweh to tell the story of his redemption and that the twelve tribes were a reflection of this. Over the centuries, however, the Zodiac became paganized.

the official tribes—because they did not receive land—thus making twelve tribes. Sometimes a tribe was left out of the counting due to a sin they had committed, and in that case Levi was counted to still total twelve (Rev. 7:4-8)

3:1-10 This chapter concerning the Levites begins with Aaron as the high priest and his four sons who served him. The narrator reminds the reader that Aaron's two oldest sons, Nadab and Abihu, were struck down and killed by Yahweh for defiling His tabernacle by burning incense in a disobedient way (Lev. 10:1-5).

Aaron's family alone had the right to handle the sacrificial atonement blood, to touch the altar, and to enter the tabernacle.¹⁵ They were the official mediators between Yahweh and Israel. The Levitical priests were to serve Aaron's family, dismantle and assemble the tabernacle when it was time to move, and guard the tabernacle, ready to kill any who trespassed. The point of the killing of the one trespassing was to prevent Yahweh from punishing the entire nation for the defilement of the tabernacle (Num. 1:53; 16-17; 25:8). They were also to minister to the people.

3:11-13 The Levites' primary task was service to Yahweh. When Yahweh first saved the firstborn males of each tribe in Egypt through the Passover lamb (Ex. 13:1-6; 19:6), they all belonged to Him in service in the priesthood. But when Israel worshiped the golden calf (Gen. 32), they lost the right to be the priest of Yahweh. So all the firstborn Levites were to take the place of the firstborn males of Israel. Only Levi stood with Moses and so were not under the punishment of Yahweh (Ex. 32:25-29). As a result, the Levites were to replace all the firstborn males of the other tribes of Israel as the priests of Yahweh. The purpose of the census in Numbers 3 was to see if the total Levites equaled the total firstborn males of Israel.

3:14-39 There were four families in the tribe of Levi: Moses and Aaron, and the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites. These four families were to camp on each of the four sides of the tabernacle, between it and the rest of Israel. Yahweh gave to each family responsibilities over different parts of the tabernacle in daily maintenance, setup, breakdown, and transportation.

The Gershonites were to camp on the west side of the tabernacle and were responsible for taking care of the curtains and coverings of the tabernacle, the veil, the entrance, and the courtyard. The Kohathites were to camp on the south side of the tabernacle and were responsible for taking care of the furniture, articles, and utensils of the tabernacle. The Merarites were to camp on the north side of the tabernacle and were responsible for taking care of the boards and bars that held up the tabernacle and the courtyard fence. Moses and Aaron's family were to camp on the east side of the tabernacle and were responsible for the needs of the tabernacle and the people of Israel. Although all the male Levites served in the tabernacle and served the people of Israel, only the descendants of Aaron were priests.

As mentioned previously, the Levites also served as guardians and as a barrier for the tabernacle to keep it from being defiled by the world in the same way that the cherubim act as guardians and a barrier for the garden of Eden and Yahweh's throne (Gen. 3:24; Ezek. 1:10; Rev. 4:7).

“Theologically the section as a whole explores the theme of God's holiness. Viewed in one way the priestly hierarchy is a means of protecting Israel from divine holiness. The introduction of another sacred order between priests and people emphasizes the difference between the fallibility of man and the perfection of God.... Viewed in another way the

¹⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 79.

hierarchy constitutes the recognized channel through which God brings stability and well-being to his people.”¹⁶

3:40-51 Yahweh then commanded that Moses number all the firstborn males of all the tribes of Israel, other than Levi, in order to see how many were supposed to have been priests and thus replaced by the Levites who were to take their place (see the comment on Num. 3:11-13). The total number of firstborn Israelites exceeded the total number of Levites by 273 men. The excess Israelites had to pay five shekels for each boy between a month and five years of age (Lev. 27:6). An ordinary worker would earn less than a shekel a month.¹⁷ Thus the tabernacle was repaid in full what it had lost through the sin of the people with the golden calf.

4:1-49 Numbers 3 counts all the male Levites who are more than a month old in order to replace the firstborn males of all the tribes, whereas Numbers 4 counts all the male Levites between 30 and 40 years old in order to take care of the tabernacle. This chapter details the requirements of how to take care of the items of the tabernacle, as well as how to pack and transport them. The priests were required to wrap the articles of the tabernacle, except the laver, and then the other Kohathites carried them. Touching a holy article or even looking at one would result in death.

The different vessels of the tabernacle were wrapped in different colors of cloths according to the different degrees of holiness. The Ark of the Covenant was wrapped in the veil, then goat skins, and then a blue cloth. The vessels from the Holy Place were wrapped in blue cloth then goat skin. The vessels in the courtyard were wrapped in purple cloth and then goat skin. The Ark of the Covenant was distinguished from the other vessels by its blue cloth.

“The sense of order and organization already observed in this book comes to its finest point in this chapter. Again, we observe that the standard pattern in Hebrew prose is a movement from the general to the specific, from the broad to the particular. Chapters 1-4 follow this concept nicely.... The chapters have moved from the nation as a whole to the particular families of the one tribe that has responsibility to maintain the symbols of Israel’s worship of the Lord. Each chapter gets more specific, more narrow in focus, with the central emphasis on the worship of the Lord at the Tent of Meeting.”¹⁸

Once again throughout these chapters, Numbers makes it clear that Moses obeyed and did everything that Yahweh told him to do (Ex 1:54; 3:33-34; 4:42; Heb. 3:5).

¹⁶ Philip J. Budd. *Numbers*, p. 41.

¹⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 81.

¹⁸ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 731.

B. Special Legislation (5:1–6:27)

The point of this section is to describe the legislations that would increase the spiritual life of the community as they prepared to journey to the Promised Land.

5:1-4 Now that the Levitical law had been given (book of Leviticus), Yahweh commanded that all those having skin diseases that rendered one unclean be removed from the camp before the people could go on (Lev. 13-14). This was not discrimination but rather a type of quarantine to protect the camp from the spread of diseases.

5:5-10 Yahweh repeated the law of restitution for a reparation offering (Lev. 5:14-6:7) in order to emphasize the importance of this in the life of the community as they begin to make their way to the Promised Land. Here Yahweh calls the people to publicly confess their sins and make restitution in order to experience forgiveness. Here the issue is addressed of what was to be done if the defrauded man was dead. In this case, the reparation money was to be taken to the tabernacle and given to Yahweh.

5:11-31 This testing was put in place for the husband who suspected his wife of sleeping with another man but had no witness or evidence that she was truly guilty. He could take her before the priest at the tabernacle and through a ritual done before Yahweh determine her guilt or innocence. Adultery is singled out because it is a breaking of an oath and a covenant. The covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people is compared to marriage. As He is concerned with the purity of His people, so the husband was justified to worry about the purity of his wife. Israel's covenant with Yahweh was the most important part of their identity, and after this section they were going to continue to violate their oath to the covenant.

The husband and the accused wife would come to the tabernacle with a grain offering with no oil or incense because it was a guilt offering (Lev. 2:1). The priest was to take holy water and mix it with the dust of the tabernacle in an earthen jar called the bitter water. He was then to uncover the head of the accused woman and place the grain offering in her hands. He was then to curse her with shrunken and fallen genitals and a swollen abdomen if she were, in fact, guilty of sleeping with another man. He was then to write the curse on a scroll and then scrape the words of the curse into the bitter water. The golden calf incident may be behind the imagery of the cup that they drink (Isa. 51:17, 22; Ezek. 23:30-34).

The woman was then to declare her innocence and drink the bitter water. The priest would then burn the grain offering and make her drink the bitter water again. If she was guilty, then her genitals would shrink and fall and her abdomen would swell. If she was free from the effects of the bitter water, then she was innocent and free to bear children.

This passage shows that Yahweh will not tolerate hidden sins, for nothing is hidden from Him. The previous dealt with the public confession of sin when caught whereas this passage covers what to do if someone refuses to confess or is falsely suspected of sins that he or she has not committed.

As strange as the proceedings of the law of jealousy are, the importance of this law is to maintain the purity and integrity of the marriage relationship of Yahweh's people. It is important to remember that the purpose of Numbers was not to give us all the details of each law but a general understanding in order to make a theological point. The dust that was added to the water probably symbolized the curse of sin. It is what causes humans grief as they toil for a living because of sin's curse.

We must not attribute the results of the dust and water mixture as being magic or witchcraft, especially since Yahweh has forbidden it. Some have suspected that there were other herbs mixed with the dust as well. If this is true, M. R. DeHaan offered a scientific explanation that when one feels guilt, the chemical makeup of the stomach acids is changed. It may be that the woman drinking the priest's mixture would experience a reaction with the stomach acids producing the childlessness.¹⁹

“The most probable explanation for the phrase [‘and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away’]... is that the woman suffers a collapse of the sexual organs known as a prolapsed uterus. In this condition, which may occur after multiple pregnancies, the pelvis floor (weakened by the pregnancies) collapses, and the uterus literally falls down. It may lodge in the vagina, or it may actually fall out of the body through the vagina. If it does so, it becomes edematous and swells up like a balloon. Conception becomes impossible, and the woman's procreative life has effectively ended....”²⁰

It is also clear from the text that this is more than just a scare tactic to get the woman to confess, for the text adds that there would be physical signs of abdominal swelling. Most likely, Yahweh intervened and caused the shrunken and dropped genitals and the swollen abdomen, especially since this ritual was done in the tabernacle. Prayer and symbolic rituals both depend ultimately on the will of Yahweh for their efficacy. Why did Yahweh require this ritual when He was the one behind the judgment on the woman? Because rituals reveal values at their deepest level. Humans express in rituals what moves them the most. And since the form of expression is generally accepted by the community and mandatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed.²¹ It is important to remember that the ritual of sacrificed animals for the atonement of sin does not really atone for sin; rather, it is a demonstration of faith. Thus, this ritual is a demonstration of one giving herself over to Yahweh for judgment.

Why was only the woman punished if she had been unfaithful? The answer seems to be that her male companion in sin was unknown. Yahweh does not discriminate—if she had been proven unfaithful and the adulterer was also identifiable, both partners should have suffered death by stoning (Lev. 20:10). It is important to also notice that this procedure protected the wife from false jealousy and condemnation.

It seems unjust that Yahweh did not provide procedures for when a woman suspected her husband of being unfaithful. However, the man, as head of the family, is not answerable to his wife but to Yahweh Himself. It is not the job of the woman to judge the man, but Yahweh Himself would judge a husband who was unfaithful to his wife (Heb. 13:4). It may be that the woman could be a symbol of Israel and the man a symbol of Christ. Since Yahweh is selective in what He chooses to record in Scripture as it pertains to and foreshadows the coming of Christ, the sin of the man is not mentioned. In this sense, the man, symbolizing Christ, is never guilty of adultery, only the woman symbolizing Israel/Church.

6:1-8 The name *Nazirite* comes from the Hebrew word *nazar*, which means “to consecrate or separate oneself.” The Nazirites' hair, the high priest's turban, and the anointing oil are all called *nazar*. The Nazirite vow was a voluntary and temporary vow of special dedication to Yahweh in

¹⁹ M. R. DeHaan. *The Chemistry of the Blood and Other Stirring Messages*, p. 48.

²⁰ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31),” *Vetus Testamentum* 34:1 (January 1984): 20-21.

²¹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 93.

His service. (Samson and Samuel are examples of lifelong Nazirite vows.) These men or women became like a temporary priest in that they dedicated themselves to a more stringent life of holiness. Yahweh lists the requirements of someone who chooses to make this vow. The requirements were three-fold. First, the Nazirite was to abstain from grapes and wine. Generally, wine was a sign of abundance and blessing, but there were the dangers of desiring wine for its own sake. The second requirement was to avoid any contact with anything dead since death is a result of sin. Third, the Nazirite was to grow out his or her hair and not cut it. This was the sign of the covenant, made clear by the fact that if they violated the covenant, they were to cut their hair (remove the sign) and start over.

The restrictions on the Nazirite suggest that their sanctity surpassed that of the priests and resembled the high priest. On completion of the vow, the Nazirite had to offer the same range of sacrifices as the high priest at his ordination. Unlike the fact that only men could be high priest, women could become Nazirites. The Nazirite was not allowed to offer sacrifices, enter the tabernacle, bless the people, or give authoritative teaching.

“This law specifically shows that there were provisions not just for the priest but for all members of God’s people to commit themselves wholly to God. Complete holiness was not the sole prerogative of the priesthood or the Levites. The Nazirite vow shows that even laypersons, men and women in everyday walks of life, could enter into a state of complete devotion to God. Thus this segment of text teaches that any person in God’s nation could be totally committed to holiness.”²²

6:9-12 If someone died in the Nazirite’s presence, making him unclean, then he must shave his head when he purifies himself and then again seven days later. The hair was the sign of his vow to Yahweh, so removal of the sign showed that he was no longer a Nazirite. He was then to offer the minimum sacrifice—two turtledoves or two young pigeons as burnt and purification offering (Lev. 1; 4). He was then to bring a lamb as a reparation offering to rededicate himself to Yahweh (Lev. 5).

6:13-21 When the Nazirite fulfilled his vow for the length of time he had vowed himself to Yahweh, he was to present himself before Yahweh at the tabernacle. He must present burnt, purification, peace, grain, and wine offerings to Yahweh. He must then shave his head and place the hair on the altar for burning.

6:22-27 The Aaronic blessing shows that the primary job of the priests was to be a blessing to the people. The blessing has three parts, starting with a general blessing and ending in a more specific one. Each of the three clauses expresses Yahweh’s commitment to Israel—a commitment that promises security, prosperity, and life to the fullest. The focus of the benediction is Yahweh’s movement toward His people and then His blessing.

Even the structure of the blessing in Hebrew has a poetic flow. Line one consists of 15 letters making 3 words, line two consists of 20 letters making 5 words, and line three consists of 25 letters making 7 words. Yahweh’s name is repeated three times. Grammatically, there is no need to repeat Yahweh’s name, but the repetition emphasizes that Yahweh is the source of all Israel’s benefits, as does the last clause “I will bless them” where the “I” is emphatic.²³ If you subtract the name of Yahweh, there are twelve words left for the tribes of Israel.

²² John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 377-78.

²³ Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 101.

“...the high priestly blessing was pronounced whenever the nation of Israel gathered for collective worship and sacrifice as well as when the individual Israelite brought sacrifices to the LORD. The nature of the blessing was that of an oracle, a sure word from God that He had accepted the sacrifice and was pleased with the worshiper. The contents of the blessing were protection, gracious dealings, and peace with God, which assuredly produced the effect of joy, security, and confidence on the part of the people.”²⁴

²⁴ Neil W. Arnold, “The High Priestly Blessing,” *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987): 50.

C. The Dedication of the Tabernacle and the Priest (7:1–10:10)

This section records the dedication of the tabernacle and the priestly preparation for the journey to the Promised Land.

7:1-89 These verses record each tribe's gifts to the tabernacle for its dedication. Each tribe presented their gifts on a different day over twelve days. The wordiness and point of this chapter is to show that each tribe had an equal stake in the worship of Yahweh and was fully committed to support the tabernacle and the priesthood.

“The chapter stands as a monument to the pleasure of God who took enjoyment from the repetition—for these were grand gifts in the good days of his early relationship with his people. These were the honeymoon days of the marital relationship of the Lord and Israel (see Jer. 2:2-3). Each of the gifts is relished, as presentations by a lover in the early days of the bliss of marriage.”²⁵

8:1-4 The lighting of the lamps in the tabernacle symbolized the consecration of the Levites, who were to represent the whole nation as lights to the world (Isa. 42:6). Aaron was to arrange the light so that it always highlighted the table of showbread. The lampstand represented the light and tree of life of Yahweh. The table of showbread represented the provision of Yahweh. Both of these items look back to the Garden of Eden.

8:5-26 The consecration of the priests had happened earlier (Lev. 8), but now the Levites, as a substitution of the firstborn of each tribe, were to be consecrated before the people. With the priests, the people had only looked on, but now they were to actively lay their hands on the Levites since the Levites were standing in the place of the people. Thus, the priests (the descendants of Aaron) were mediators between Yahweh and the people, while the Levites bridged the priests and the people.

“The distinctive emphasis of this section is that the Levites are nevertheless not remote from the community. Through the laying on of hands they in some sense represent the people at large, and constitute an offering from the people. Unlike the priests they do not receive anointing or special vestments. Like laymen they wash their clothes for the special rites. They are perhaps something of a bridge between priests and people.”²⁶

9:1-14 On the first anniversary of the Passover and their exodus out of Egypt, the Israelites celebrated the Passover a second time on the night before they left for the Promised Land. How the blood being painted on the door post, detailed in Exodus 12, was to be carried out is not clear.

There were some who were not able to celebrate the Passover because they had become ceremonially unclean by touching a dead body. Yahweh had prescribed the death penalty for those who did not celebrate the Passover, yet these men were not able to, according to Yahweh's Law. Notice that when Moses did not know how to handle a situation, his immediate response was to go to Yahweh for answers rather than try to figure it out himself. Yahweh allowed the men to celebrate the Passover on the same day of the next month, after they had become clean again.

²⁵ Ronald B. Allen. “Number.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 756.

²⁶ Philip J. Budd. *Numbers*, p. 94.

9:15-23 As the people prepared to leave and journey to the Promised Land, the narrator reminds the readers of how Yahweh led the people from place to place by the movement of the pillar of cloud and fire. It is important to remember that the people were totally dependent upon the leading of the Shekinah glory of Yahweh for when they moved and when they settled down to camp again.

“The writer is intent on showing that at this point in their walk with the Lord, Israel was obedient and followed the Lord’s guidance. The writer’s concern to make this point can be seen in that seven times in this brief narrative, it is said that they ‘obeyed the commandment of the Lord’ and thus traveled when the cloud lifted from the tabernacle and moved (9:18, 20, 23; cf. Ex 17:1).”²⁷

10:1-10 The horns described here were long silver trumpets as opposed to the spiraling ram’s horn that is blown at the Feast of Trumpets. These trumpets were for signaling the rest of the camp when the Shekinah glory of Yahweh moved so that the people could then begin to pack up and move as well. These trumpets were also blown as an alarm within the camp. In Israel’s later history, the priests blew these trumpets on other festal occasions (Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:35, 41; 1 Chron. 15:24; 16:6; 2 Chron. 5:12; 7:6; 29:27).

“The impression that this narrative intends to give is that of an orderly and obedient departure from Sinai. The picture is a far cry from the scene which Moses saw when he first returned from the mountain and found the nation celebrating before the golden calf: ‘the people were running wild and Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies’ (Ex 32:25). In other words, the author is trying to make a point with this narrative. He shows that after the incident of the golden calf the Mosaic Law was able to bring order and obedience to the nation. The Law, necessitated by the disobedience of the people, was having its effect on them.”²⁸

²⁷ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 381.

²⁸ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 381.

II. From Sinai to Kadesh Barnea (10:11–19:22)

The Israelites had been at Mount Sinai for almost a year (Ex. 19:1; Num. 10:11). Now that the people had the Mosaic Law, the tabernacle, and the sacrificial system, they were ready to journey to the Promised Land.

The trip from Sinai to Kadesh on Canaan's southern border was normally a journey of only 11 days (Deut. 1:2). Kadesh would be the place at which Israel would finally enter the Promised Land, taking the land as their own in obedience to Yahweh and for His glory. This would then also begin the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be given a land (Gen. 12:1-3).

However, it is at this point that they cease to do all that Yahweh commanded them and once again act like they did when they journeyed to Mount Sinai and with the golden calf. This division records a dismal record of Israel's ingratitude for Yahweh's constant provisions and rebellion against Yahweh. The reader who focuses only on Yahweh's judgment misses a major emphasis of the story. The more impressive feature in this text is Yahweh's continuing mercy against constant and outright rebellion of the people.

A. Grumbling and Unrest (10:11-12:16)

The end of Numbers 10 is the high point spiritually of the book of Numbers and the current generation of Israelites. Numbers 11 begins the spiraling decline of Israel to the point of outright rebellion against Yahweh that would lead to their wanderings in the wilderness and their eventual deaths. Because this generation could never embrace Yahweh for who He really is, they would never experience His full blessings.

10:11-28 Just as Yahweh commanded, the Israelites packed up the camp when His Shekinah glory began to move, and they marched in the order that He had commanded them. The wilderness of Paran was in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, south of Kadesh.

10:29-36 Moses asked his father-in-law's family to join him in entering the Promised Land and receiving all the blessings that Yahweh had promised Israel. At first he refused, wanting to stay in his own land, and then he agreed to go with Moses.

A problem here is that Numbers says Hobab is the brother-in-law of Moses, while Judg. 4:11 says that he is Moses' father-in-law. There is not enough information to figure out his true relationship to Moses. In order to explain how Hobab could be both father-in-law and brother-in-law, some have suggested that Hobab is the family name.

11:1-3 The people began to complain, and, in response, Yahweh sent fire into the camp to burn among the people and around them. Because there is no mention of loss of life, this was most likely a warning to not fall back into the same attitudes and actions that had been characteristic of the people on their journey to Mount Sinai. This fire could have been lightning that caused fires on the ground. There was no specific word for *lightning* in the ancient languages, and it was often seen as the fire of the gods because it looked different, came from the sky, and, when striking the earth, burned as fire did. Some people saw this for the warning that it was and cried out to Yahweh in repentance. Yahweh always responds to repentant people with mercy and grace.

11:4-9 As before, the complaining of the people began with the "mixed multitude." These were the Israelites who had intermarried with Egyptians and had left Egypt with the rest of the

Israelites (Ex. 12:38). Though Yahweh had provided bread for Israel miraculously and daily for the last year, the people were discontent because the food had become boring to them. They had taken a miracle and the provision of Yahweh and treated it as normal or mundane. The fish, cucumbers, and other foods mentioned here were known to thrive in the fertile waters and soil of the delta region of Egypt along the Mediterranean Sea.

“...in ancient times meat was eaten in Israel only on special occasions. In the wilderness it would have been very much a luxury. In any event, the offense of the demand for meat was just part of the larger offense of romanticizing the time in Egypt, where there had always been an abundance of fish and fresh vegetables. They were saying in effect that the entire so-called ‘deliverance’ from slavery had turned out to be one huge disappointment.”²⁹

11:10-15 Moses, feeling overwhelmed and annoyed by the disobedience and unfaithfulness of the people, cried out to Yahweh. In his frustration, Moses reminded Yahweh of how he did not even want to lead these people in the beginning and that the burden was too much for him to bear. Though Moses was wrong in thinking that he was expected to be the provider for the people’s needs, he at least turned to Yahweh with his frustration and for guidance. Moses’ rhetorical questions (Num. 11:12) point to Yahweh as the one who gave life to the people. His language that depicts Yahweh as maternal is unusual but not unique in Scripture (Ex. 4:22; Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Hos. 11:1; 1 Thess. 2:7).

11:16-30 Yahweh graciously provided Moses with seventy men to help lead the nation, all of whom would have the Spirit of Yahweh rest upon them, making them prophets. To be a prophet is to receive and speak the will of Yahweh to the people. Seventy matches the number of Israelite nations and the number of angels that were over those nations (Deut. 32:8), as well as the number of Jacob’s family when he entered Egypt (Gen. 46:26-29; Ex. 1:5, Deut. 10:22). Ten is symbolic of government, and seven is symbolic of completion.

Yahweh stated that not only would He give the people meat but that He would make them sick with the meat; for an entire month, they would eat so much meat that they would become sick with it. This punishment was not vindictive but disciplinary and was intended to teach the people to appreciate all that Yahweh had done for them (Ps. 106:13-15).

Two men who received the Spirit of Yahweh began to prophecy, which ended up dampening the grumbling of the people and was a sign to them that Yahweh was working in their midst. In the First Testament era, not all people had the Holy Spirit—only the prophets and, later, the kings who were anointed had the Holy Spirit rest upon them. Even then, the Spirit did not indwell them but only rested upon them temporarily. Moses looked forward to a day when all those who belong to Yahweh would have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and would know Yahweh personally (Jer. 31:31-34; Joel 2:28-29; Jn. 14:16-17; 16:7, 13; Acts 2).

“The central purpose of the narrative appears to be to show the failure of Moses’ office as mediator for the people [v. 14]... The ideal leadership of God’s people is shown in the example of the seventy elders... In other words, this narrative shows that Moses longed for a much different type of community than the one formed under the Law at Sinai. He longed for a community led not by a person like himself but a community guided by God’s Spirit [v. 29; cf. Deut. 30:6]... The view expressed by Moses in this narrative is precisely that of the later

²⁹ B. Maarsingh. *Numbers: A Practical Commentary*, p. 39.

Israelite prophets in their description of the new covenant [cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:20; 36:22-27; Joel 2:28].”³⁰

11:31-35 When Yahweh sent the quail, He also brought a plague upon the people for their rebellion against Him. Most likely this plague was against the mixed multitude who had begun the grumbling. The reference to the quail being “three feet deep” most likely means that the quail flew low, three feet from the ground, so that the people could grab them from the air. It is very unlikely that the quail were piled three feet deep on the ground a day’s journey in every direction.

12:1-3 Miriam, leading, and Aaron complained against Moses for marrying a Cushite woman. This is not Zipporah, Moses’ first wife and a Midianite from Arabia (Ex. 2:21). It is not clear whether Moses had married a second woman in addition to Zipporah or had married the Cushite woman after the death of Zipporah. Marrying a Cushite woman was not a violation of the Law, for Yahweh had forbidden marriage only to those in the Canaanite tribes (Ex. 34:16). The real issue was that Miriam and Aaron resented Moses for having sole leadership over Israel and thought that they too should be elevated.

The narrator states that the complaint against Moses’ being power hungry was unjustified, for he was the humblest person on earth. The word “humble” comes from the Hebrew word *anaw*, which sometimes refers to those in real poverty or those who are likely to be exploited. But more often it denotes an attitude of humility and dependence on Yahweh. Only Moses is described as “entrusted with all my house.”

12:4-10 Yahweh did not allow their rebellion to go unpunished but inflicted Miriam with a skin disease, which is symbolic of sin (Lev. 13-14). Aaron was left untouched because he was the high priest and had to be ceremonially clean in order to serve in the tabernacle on behalf of the people. Additionally, it seems that Aaron never took the lead in rebellion against Yahweh but rather was easily influenced and followed others.

12:11-16 The irony is that Moses interceded on his sister’s behalf and asked Yahweh to heal her. Yahweh granted this but removed her from the camp for seven days as one unclean (Lev. 14:8). The purpose of this chapter is to vindicate Moses’ leadership before the people.

³⁰ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 385-86.

B. The Report of the Twelve Spies (13:1–14:45)

This section is the climax of the book, where the constant rebellion of the people reached its culmination in their blatant refusal to enter Canaan and receive the land and blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. This was their second grievous rebellion against Yahweh—the first being their worship of the golden calf after Yahweh had redeemed them out of Egypt (Ex. 32). Now they refused to take the land of Yahweh's blessings, flowing with milk and honey, and accused Him of trying to kill them. What makes this act so grievous is that the people did not believe that Yahweh could give them what He had promised, which led to their rejection of dwelling and resting in the land of promise.



13:1-16 Numbers states that Yahweh commanded Moses to send out twelve men, one from each tribe, to spy out the land of Canaan. But according to Deut. 1:22, it was the people's idea to spy out the land, and Yahweh then allowed them to do it. Yahweh already knew what the land was like; however, due to their lack of belief He allowed them to go. Perhaps this was a test to see if they would trust Him despite what they would see in the land.

Of the twelve men, Hoshea is mentioned, whom Moses renamed Joshua. The Hebrew word *Hoshea* means "he saves." The Hebrew word *Joshua* means "Yahweh saves." Joshua would later lead Israel into Canaan, forty years after Moses' death (Josh. 1:1-6).

13:17-20 Moses told them to travel from the Negev in the south all the way north through the hill country to see what the land looked like. They were to investigate what the people were like and

what the land was like. The spies traveled from the Negev, south of Canaan, all the way to the north in Eshcol, which is north of the Sea of Galilee and Damascus. It was in this northern area that they found a cluster of grapes so big it required two men to carry it on a pole between them. The point is not that the individual grapes were large but that a single branch had produced an abundance of fruit, just as Yahweh had promised. The narrator did not mention the enemies living in the land (who were insignificant to Yahweh's power) but rather focused on the abundance of fruit in the land in accordance with the promises and faithfulness of Yahweh.

13:26-29 When the spies returned, they reported that the land was fruitful but that there was also a great and strong people present in the land. This should have not been a surprise, for Yahweh had already informed them of both of these points. He also had promised to drive the people of the land out before them just as He had the Egyptian army (Ex. 7-14) and the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16). However, unlike the narrator, who focuses on the fruitfulness of the land, the spies focused on the fortified people in the land.

The phrase “flowing with milk and honey” in Num. 13:27 refers to the abundance in the land. Milk and honey were sweet and were considered aphrodisiacs in the ancient Near East (there was no overabundance of sugar). These two things could only be found in abundance when there was also an abundance of rain in the land, which was controlled by Yahweh. Thus, if Israel were obedient to Yahweh, He would bring rain, and the land would be filled and flowing with blessings of life.

13:30-33 Caleb silenced the other spies and said that they could take the land, for Yahweh was with them and faithful to His promises. But the other spies began to spread an evil report that the people in the land were too great for them to conquer because all the people there were of great stature and the Nephilim were there. It is possible that many of the people there were much taller than the Israelites (Deut. 3:11) since the average height of an Israelite was 5'3". The Nephilim were mentioned in Gen. 6:1-5 as being the possible offspring of a union between human women and the “sons of God” (fallen angels).³¹ However, it is unlikely that this report is accurate since these beings were all wiped out in the flood and since the narrator referred to this report as evil (Num. 13:32). One should not trust the report of a people who have constantly exaggerated things, like how great life was in Egypt, and who are rebelling against Yahweh.

14:1-10 Despite Caleb's speech, the people chose to listen to the evil report, and they began to grumble against Moses and Aaron. The Hebrew verb meaning “to murmur” is a lot stronger than “grumbling” or “murmuring” and signifies a lack of confidence in one's leaders and the desire to rebel against and stone them. This became evident by the people talking about going back to Egypt, which was controlled by the Egyptian pagan gods, and by their desire to stone Moses and Aaron. The people once again stated that their life in slavery in Egypt was better than their deliverance and freedom in Yahweh. They also stated that they feared their children would die in the land of Canaan if they tried to enter it.

Moses and Aaron responded by falling face down on the ground before the people. The act showed humility before Yahweh. They were not bowing before the people but before Yahweh, in front of the people, in intercessory prayer (Num. 16:41-50). Here it prevented immediate judgment of Yahweh.

³¹ See *The Divine Council of Yahweh* at www.knowingthebible.net.

Joshua then stood up and proclaimed the same message and confidence that Caleb had proclaimed: the land was good, and Yahweh would give them victory over its people. Perhaps Joshua delayed in speaking up when Caleb did, for if he had spoken up too early he could have been dismissed for being close with Moses. However, the people still did not listen and did not stop complaining, and so the glory of Yahweh appeared to them.

14:11-12 Yahweh was angry with the people, for not only had they attributed His salvation to the Egyptian gods (Ex. 32:4), but after all He had proven and done for them, they now rejected His trustworthiness and His ability to fulfill the promises He had made to them. Yahweh stated that He would remove the people from the earth and start over with a new people through Moses. Yahweh had previously declared this after Israel's worship of the golden calf (Ex. 32:7-8). Yahweh had every right to destroy Israel, first by the fact that He was their God who had created them and given them life, and now they had sinned against Him, a holy God. They were now under His judgment as their creator and sovereign king over creation. Second, they had entered into a covenant with Him, whereby they swore by the blood of an animal sacrifice that they would obey His commands or they would die.

14:13-19 Moses immediately stepped in and interceded on behalf of the people. Moses made the argument that the Egyptians had seen Yahweh's great and powerful deliverance of Israel. And many nations knew of Yahweh's pillar of fire and cloud that led Israel. If, after seeing this, the nations found out that Yahweh had killed Israel, they would say that Yahweh was not able to bring Israel into the land as He had promised. This would also undermine the character and trustworthiness of Yahweh as a good God.

Moses then stated the faithfulness of Yahweh both in judgment and blessings, as was previously stated in Ex. 20:5-6 and Ex. 34:6-7. Moses stated that consequences of dethroning Yahweh in blatant rebellion would continue for three to four generations. Here, it seems that Yahweh would punish His children for the sins of their parents. However, this contradicts Deut. 24:16 and Ezek. 18:4, which say that fathers should not be put to death for their children's sins nor children for their father's sins. It is very difficult to work out what exactly is meant here, but given the character of Yahweh, it seems that this is not saying that Yahweh punishes the children for the sins of the parents.

The Hebrew word *paqad*, translated as "visiting" or "responding," is a difficult word to translate. It does not seem to say simply that Yahweh punishes the next generations. Rather, it might be understood as "dealing with" in a negative sense or as "punishing," but it describes positive attention in Ex. 13:19. When used of Yahweh, it means that Yahweh intervenes in the lives of people for blessing or for cursing. Some have suggested understanding this to mean that those who hate Yahweh and do not keep His commandments will repeat the sins their fathers committed and thus suffer for the patterns of sin repeated from generation to generation. However, Yahweh seems to have more of a direct involvement here than this view states.

An alternate suggestion is that Yahweh would respond to the sin of the fathers by dealing with the children to the third and fourth generations of Israel *corporately*, not on individual children for individual sins. Deut. 24:16 and Ezek. 18:4 refer specifically to individual crimes punishable by death. And the punishment goes both ways, emphasizing the individual nature of the crime. Here, the intent seems less intensive. It communicates more that the degree to which Israel obeyed the commandments would affect the blessings and life of the community. Therefore, Yahweh would deal corporately with Israel for four generations to come. Even in the modern

world, this makes sense as we look at the sins of nations.³² However, in Ex. 20:5-6 and Ex. 34:6-7 Yahweh also promised to bless Israel with covenantal faithfulness for thousands of generations. The point is that He would bless to a further extent than the negative consequences He promised.

14:20 After Moses' intercession, Yahweh relented and chose not to destroy Israel as He had said He would. Does this mean Yahweh really wanted to kill the Israelites? Does this mean Yahweh was persuaded by a human, who simply made an argument that Yahweh had not thought of, and convinced Him to change His mind? Can Yahweh be persuaded?

Yahweh is both a just and a merciful God. As a just and righteous God, Yahweh cannot tolerate evil and sin. His very nature demands that He punish and deal with sin. This is what makes Him good, for no human is satisfied with a God who can look at the evil committed in the world and be all right with or apathetic to it, never exacting justice. But Yahweh is also a merciful God who loves us. He loves us so much that He does not want to punish us to the full extent that justice would require. To show mercy and forgive means that one has to give up justice being carried out on a wrong. One cannot act in a completely just and completely merciful way at the same time. To truly punish evil in a just way means there can be no mercy, and to truly be merciful means that one would have to give up a just penalty. Yet to not be just or merciful is a "violation" of Yahweh's character. This is the problem that sin in the world presents to the character of Yahweh. He cannot be completely just *and* completely merciful simultaneously when it comes to dealing with sinners whom He loves.

As already mentioned, the sovereignty and justice of Yahweh gave Him every right and demanded that Israel be punished for their sin. But as a merciful and loving God, He also desired to forgive them. So, Yahweh invited Moses to intercede on Israel's behalf. He wanted Moses to share Yahweh's love for His people and to pray for them, to seek forgiveness. Moses was not telling or reminding Yahweh of anything that He did not know or had forgotten. Moses was articulating what He had learned about Yahweh and demonstrating that his desires for Israel had become the same as Yahweh's. Moses, who started off not knowing Yahweh and rejecting His call to deliver Israel, had come to know Yahweh so intimately that he wanted to be like Yahweh by saving Israel. Moses' three points were not an argument of persuasion but a confession and articulation of the character of Yahweh. It is this that led to Yahweh forgiving the people.

Yahweh's statements concerning His intentions or will can be either unconditional or conditional. *Decrees* are statements of Yahweh that are classified as *unconditional*, and nothing the recipient does can change this (Gen. 22:16-18). *Announcements* are statements of Yahweh that are classified as *conditional*, where if the recipient meets the conditions of the "if...then" statement, then Yahweh will relent (Jer. 26:4-6). However, most statements are unmarked, meaning it is not clear whether He is making a decree or an announcement. For example, when Nathan told David that his son would die because of his sin (2 Sam. 12:14), David cried out to Yahweh for the child's life because the condition of Yahweh's statement was ambiguous. It was after the child died that David knew that Yahweh's will here was that of a decree. On the other hand, other ambiguous statements of Yahweh proved conditional. Micah announced that Jerusalem would become a heap of rubble because of their sins (Mic. 3:12), but one discovers from Jer. 26:17-19 that the judgment was averted by the repentant Hezekiah, proving the statement a conditional one. Ex. 32:12-14 is another example of this. Recognizing Yahweh as

³² See Peter Enns. *Exodus*, pp. 415-416.

one who can change His mind does not threaten His immutability; rather, it shows Him as one who desires and is able to have a give-and-take relationship with humanity.³³

“In only two of the thirty-eight instances in the OT is this word used of men repenting. God’s repentance or ‘relenting’ is an anthropomorphism (a description of God in human forms) that aims at showing us that he can and does change in his actions and emotions to men when given proper grounds for doing so, and thereby he does not change in his basic integrity or character (cf. Pss. 99:6; 106:45; Jer. 18:8; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:10; James 5:16). The grounds for the Lord’s repenting are three: (1) intercession (cf. Amos 7:1-6); (2) repentance of the people (Jer. 18:3-11; Jonah 3:9-10); and (3) compassion (Deut. 32:36; Judg. 2:18; 2 Sam 24:16).”³⁴

This passage makes it clear that the character and actions of Yahweh are complicated, and the fact that Yahweh reveals this part of Himself through Scriptures shows that He refuses to allow humans to put Him in a box. We do Him and Scriptures an injustice when we gloss over or oversimplify passages like this. The main point is that Yahweh loves humanity so deeply that despite His need to execute justice, He is looking for every excuse to forgive us. With little intercession from Moses, Yahweh quickly relented and forgave Israel. This pattern is seen over and over in Scriptures—how little intercession and prayer it takes to move Yahweh to forgiveness. Decade after decade, He will allow the sins of Israel to go unpunished. And time after time, the prayers of the prophets lead Yahweh to pour out His mercy on Israel.

This means, however, that the sins of Israel will go unpunished, and Yahweh’s justice will not be carried out, so His character as a just God is threatened. Thus, the cross would bring justice and mercy together in a way that nothing else could. By Jesus being a human, He could represent humanity in their sin. And all the wrath of Yahweh could be poured out on Christ as humanity’s representative, killing Christ and satisfying Yahweh’s justice. Yet at the same time, Christ dying as our substitute allows humanity to be forgiven and declared truly innocent, satisfying the mercy of Yahweh. (Rom. 3:21-26).

However, Yahweh relenting is not the same as Him agreeing to do nothing. He still punished Israel. Israel, corporately, was forgiven for its sins. However, each individual must accept this repentance in order to receive the life that Yahweh granted. Still, some will reject this forgiveness in their continued rebellion and so reap the judgment of death for their sin (Ex. 32:25-29).

14:21-39 Yahweh saw this repentance and granted forgiveness to the nation, which He always does when there is repentance. Thus, the nation, corporately, was forgiven for its sins. However, the consequences were that everyone 20 years and older were not allowed to ever enter the land. The irony is that the people had feared that if they entered the land their children would be killed (Num. 14:3), yet Yahweh’s judgment on them was that only their children would enter the land and receive His promises. The only exceptions from the older generation were Caleb, Joshua, and Moses (who would lose the right to enter the land in Num. 20:1-13). Now all the people would wander in the wilderness for forty years (a year for each day the spies were in the land) until this older generation had all died. In addition to this, the ten spies who had led Israel in their rebellion were immediately struck down dead. In the ancient Near East, those who made false

³³ For a further discussion, see Robert Chisholm. “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December, 1995.

³⁴ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. “Exodus.” In *Genesis-Numbers*. Vol. 2 of the *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 479.

accusations were punished by receiving the sentence that those they had accused would receive (Deut. 19:16-19). The spies wrongfully accused the land of homicide, therefore they could expect to receive the death penalty themselves.

14:40-45 A group of people hearing the judgment of Yahweh realized they had sinned against Yahweh and decided to enter the land despite Yahweh's judgment against them. They decided to go ahead and enter the land as Yahweh had originally commanded. At this Yahweh told them not to go because this would be rebellion against His judgment and He would not be with them. They went anyway, only to be killed by the Amalekites and Canaanites because Yahweh was not with them. This shows that the people still did not get it. The issue was not just about entering the land but about obedience to Yahweh no matter the command. They had not repented of their lack of trust in Yahweh but merely feared the judgment. That is why Yahweh did not relent from His judgment in response to their actions.

C. Supplemental Laws (15:1-41)

This section contains more laws that look back to Kadesh and forward to Canaan. The fact that Yahweh gave the people more laws is not only due to their rebellion but also is a confirmation that He had not cast off His people but would bring them into the Promised Land eventually. These laws are repeated from the giving of the Law at Sinai but are here emphasized again and supplemented in light of living in the land. There are three sections, each beginning with “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘say to the people of Israel’” (Num. 15:1, 17, 37).

15:1-16 Yahweh made it clear that every burnt and peace offering was to be accompanied with a grain and wine offering. The burnt offering was a bull, goat, or lamb that was completely consumed in the fire of judgment to remove the guilt of sin (Lev. 1). No other offerings were accepted until this had been offered. The peace offering was a freewill offering in which the fat and organs were offered in the fire as an offering to Yahweh, a portion of the meat was given to the priest, and the rest was taken home by the worshiper to be a meal of fellowship with neighbors as praise to Yahweh (Lev. 3). The grain offering, given from the worshiper’s own field, was an offering in which a portion was burnt on the altar and the rest was given to the priests (Lev. 2). This was the only offering that was the result of the worshiper’s own works being joined with the works of Yahweh. The wine offering was like the grain except it emphasized the blessings of Yahweh poured out on the people. This was a sign of both the blessings of the Promised Land and the coming Messiah. Wholehearted repentance and an offering of sacrifice could restore them to a position where they could be restored to His blessings.

15:17-21 Yahweh required that after Israel entered the Promised Land a loaf of bread be made out of the first fruits of every harvest that the land produced as an offering to Yahweh. This was their way of acknowledging that the land they had was given to them by Yahweh and that they were trusting Him for further harvests.

15:22-29 Yahweh required that when the community of Israel sinned unintentionally they were to make atonement as a community for that sin. They were to offer up a burnt offering (Lev. 1), a grain offering (Lev. 2), a wine offering (Num. 15:1-16), and a purification offering (Lev. 4). If any individual sinned unintentionally, they were to go to the priests with a purification offering.

15:30-36 These offerings did not cover sins committed in defiance of Yahweh. The consequence for sins of defiance was death. Lev. 6:1-7 did allow for occasions wherein a person who had committed an intentional sin could be forgiven if they publicly confessed and repented of the sin.

The narrator goes on to give an example of an intentional sin of a man who chose to collect sticks for a fire on the Sabbath. The man was not put to death for gathering sticks on the wrong day of the week but rather for his blatant disregard for Yahweh’s commands (Ex. 31:14-15; 35:2; Lev. 20:2). By gathering sticks, which would have taken a while, he showed his total disregard for the Sabbath and blatant intent on doing what he wanted to do. Despite the fact that Yahweh had clearly stated, repeated, and emphasized not only the requirements for the Sabbath but also its importance, this man still violated the command, showing where His heart truly was.

The First Testament indicates eleven offenses punishable by stoning: idolatry (Deut. 17:2-7); encouragement of idolatry (Deut. 13:6-10); child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2-5); prophecy in the name of another god (Deut. 13:1-5); divination (Lev. 20:27); blasphemy (Lev. 24:15-16); breaking the

Sabbath (here); murder by an ox (Ex. 21:28-29); adultery (Deut. 22:22.); rebellion of a son (Deut. 21:18-21.); and violation of Yahweh's ban on plunder devoted to Him (Josh. 7:25).

15:37-41 The hem of a robe in the ancient Near East was decorated in such a way that it marked which family one belonged to, along with their status in the family and in relation to other families. The more colorful and richly decorated the hem, the more noble the person. In addition to this, Yahweh commanded the Israelites to attach four tassels to their hems on the four corners of their robes. Each tassel was to have a blue thread woven through it in order to symbolize their spiritual connection to Yahweh. Blue was the color of the spiritual and of royalty. Not only did these tassels mark the people as belonging to Yahweh, but they would have been a constant reminder to the people of His commands and to be holy as He is holy.

D. The Rebellion of Korah and Others (16:1–17:13)

This section tells three stories that illustrate the need and legitimacy of the Aaronic priesthood. Just as there were challenges to Moses' leadership, so there were challenges to Aaron's.

It is not possible to determine from the text where or when during the 38 years of wandering this incident took place. It was more important to the author to show the people's rebellion against the priesthood—after the previous section of priestly laws—than to tell when it happened chronologically.

“As the laws increase and the constraints grow, the people seem less willing or less capable of following them. At this point in the narrative we see that the whole order of the priesthood is thrown open to direct confrontation. God's Word revealed at Sinai, which at first seemed so final and authoritative, is now being challenged on every side.”³⁵

16:1-3 The narrator records the rebellion of Korah, a Levite from the Kohathite branch of the tribe of Levi, and Dathan, Abiram, and On from the tribe of Rueben. They led 250 leaders from the other tribes. Korah, leading the rebellion, claimed that everyone was holy, thus having the right to be priests as well, and that Aaron's family was not special. Though Korah's comments sound like he was advocating for the priesthood of all of Israel, he most likely did not desire to make everyone priests and do away with the privileges of the tribe of Levi since he was a Levite himself. Israel had lost the right to be a priestly nation (Ex. 19:5-6) when they worshiped the golden calf (Ex. 32). Korah probably framed the argument in the most general terms as to attract the greatest number of supporters against Moses and Aaron. From Moses' response, it is clear that what Korah truly desired was the high priesthood.

“In v. 10b Moses comes to the nub of the matter—not being satisfied with the position to which God has called one, but wanting more for the sake of power and prestige. It is clear that the Levites' call was to ministry or service of the people, not to power and position over them. This misunderstanding is near the heart of that which makes Korah's rebellion so tragic: a misunderstanding of God's call as to privilege and not to service.”³⁶

16:4-11 Moses commanded the leaders to all present themselves before Yahweh with their censers filled with fire. Yahweh would then choose the one He wanted to lead the priesthood. The test of rightful priesthood involved offering incense because this was the most holy priestly responsibility that they so desired. This should have filled them with the fear of Yahweh since He had already shown how He felt about those who took this privilege upon themselves when He struck down Nadab and Abihu for offering their own fire and incense (Lev. 10:1-3), yet they stood in arrogance before Him.

16:12-15 Moses then sent for Dathan, Abiram, and On of the tribe of Rueben to stand before him. But they refused to come before Moses. They blamed Moses for their failure to enter the Promised Land and accused Moses of seizing kingship over the nation of Israel. What they failed to recognize was that it was their rebellion against Yahweh and His subsequent judgment that had banned them from the land (Num. 13-14). Likewise, it was not Moses and Aaron who had lifted themselves up to lead, but Yahweh had appointed them as leaders; thus, these men were

³⁵ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 391.

³⁶ Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*, p. 309.

really questioning Yahweh. Once again, they were doing the very thing—rebellious—that had caused all the problems over which they were angry and rebellious.

16:16-27 Moses then repeated the command for all the leaders to present themselves before Yahweh for judgment. The 250 leaders stood in opposition to Moses and Aaron. Yahweh then told Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the whole community of Israel so that He might consume them in His judgment.

Moses and Aaron fell down before Yahweh and pleaded that He not judge everyone since it was only the leaders who were guilty of rebellion. So Yahweh instructed Moses to command all the people of Israel to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On. And the people moved away.

16:28-35 Moses announced to all the people that if these leaders died of old age and natural causes, then they would know that Moses was not the leader that Yahweh had chosen. But if these men died by being swallowed up by the ground alive, then the people would know that Moses was in fact chosen by Yahweh as their leader. Yahweh judged these men by causing the ground to open up and swallow them, along with their families and tents. Then fire came forth from the pillar of cloud and consumed the 250 other men who had followed them in rebellion. Yahweh killed them because their sin was a highhanded sin of intentional rebellion against Yahweh Himself. Here we see that what leaders do, their followers will also do, but in excess, and when this happens, the community will destroy itself. These leaders were held to a high standard and so were dealt with publicly so that the community would know that rebellion is not tolerated and that Yahweh would bury those who dared to incite rebellion.

“The point is that rebellion against those whom Yahweh has chosen is rebellion against him. This does not mean simply that leaders are always right. It says that *if* the leader is appointed by God, rebellion against the leadership is rebellion against God.”³⁷

16:36-40 Yahweh reminded the people that offering incense was a ministry of the priests. He commanded Eleazar, the son of Aaron, to take the censers of those who had rebelled and to hammer them out over the bronze altar. These censers had become holy, for the men who carried them had been judged in Yahweh’s fire, and their censers had been purified. Now every time the people went to the altar to atone for their sins, they would be reminded of this rebellion, of those Yahweh had truly chosen to serve as priests at His altar, and that only the descendants of Aaron should ever approach the altar to make atonement before Yahweh.

16:41-50 However, Yahweh’s judgment was apparently not enough, and the people accused Moses and Aaron of killing the rebels. The fact that they called the rebels “Yahweh’s people” shows that they were without a clue what it really means to belong to Yahweh and serve Him. Yahweh then sent a plague among the people to judge them. Despite the people’s rebellion against Moses and Aaron, Moses commanded Aaron to burn incense in the tabernacle and make atonement on behalf of the people. The plague was stopped by Moses and Aaron’s interceding on the people’s behalf. Their intercession, in contrast to the rebellion, was truly significant, for it showed that the rebels and the people still did not fully understand nor appreciate the purpose of the priests or their responsibilities. The people sought leadership in order to have power and influence; yet true leadership is also dealing with complaining and rebellious people and humbling yourself before Yahweh to pray on behalf of the people. Leadership does not bring

³⁷ Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*, p. 318.

power and luxury; it involves self-sacrifice and being burdened for a sinful people. Aaron demonstrated the true role of the high priest when he threw himself between the sinful people and the wrath of Yahweh. In this way, he becomes a type of Jesus, who would do the same thing for the sins of the world.

17:1-13 Though Aaron's action with the censor, stopping the plague of Yahweh, would have validated Aaron as His chosen priest, Yahweh chose to make Aaron's staff bud in order to remove all doubts over whom He had chosen as priest. The staff was a sign of a man's position of leadership over his family and/or tribe. With a prince or king, it became a scepter (Gen. 49:10). The staff would have been passed from firstborn leader to firstborn as a sign of headship, and so these staffs would have been old, hard, and dead.

Yahweh made Aaron's staff bud with almonds, which had been carved onto the lampstand inside the tabernacle. The almonds were sign of new life and blessing, for they were highly desired in the ancient Near East. Yahweh had resurrected the staff of Aaron, the high priest, as a visible sign of His appointment of the one who had power to intercede on behalf of the people. This, too, becomes a type of Christ, who will be resurrected to signify that He has the right to serve as our high priest and to intercede on our behalf (Heb. 4:14-16).

Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron to place the budded staff before the Ark of the Covenant, along with the broken Ten Commandments and the jar of manna (Ex. 16:33-34). All three of these items were symbols of the people's complaining and rebellion against Yahweh.

E. Duties of Priests and Levites (18:1–19:22)

After the people's rebellion against the priesthood of Aaron's family, Yahweh responded by reemphasizing the priestly roles and duties within the nation. This section is repetitious because the people have shown that they did not get it the first time.

18:1-7 Yahweh showed that the priesthood carried great responsibilities. Not only did the priests bear the guilt for their own actions, but they also bore the guilt of the people. Yahweh stated the boundaries between the priests, the Levites, and the people. Aaron's family were the only ones allowed to oversee the people's sacrifices. The Levites were responsible for assisting the priests and maintaining the tabernacle. The people were not allowed to approach the tabernacle, or they would die.

18:8-19 Yahweh restated from Leviticus that the priests were allowed to take a portion of the grain, peace, purification, reparation, first fruits, and firstborn offerings that the people brought to Yahweh.

18:20-32 Yahweh stated that the Levites belonged to the priests and that the tithes of the people went to the Levites in order to provide for them (Lev. 27:30-33). The Levites were then to give a tithe to the priests from the tithe that they had received from the people.

19:1-10 Yahweh gave instructions to the priests on how to prepare ceremonial water for the washings of the people. They were to take a red heifer (young female cow) and offer it as a sin offering to Yahweh. Yahweh probably required a female cow because the female was the bearer of life. The ceremonial water was symbolic of life, and the red in the cow was symbolic of sin. The heifer was to be sacrificed outside the camp because it represented sin. Also to be thrown in the fire were cedar, which represented eternal life because it decayed much slower than other wood; hyssop, which represented purification; and red wool, which symbolized vital energy (Lev. 14:6). The ashes from the sacrifice were to be mixed with water, which became the ceremonial water for the cleansing of sin.

19:11-22 Yahweh then gave the general guidelines for how the ceremonial water was to be used. He focused on the cases where people would encounter dead bodies, probably because this was the final result of sin and so common in their lives.

“...the ‘unclean’ provision of seven days was practical for most acute, bacterial diseases fatal in that day... Verse 21 notes that ‘anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening.’ These provisions recognize that not only is washing important in mechanically cleansing one from microbes, but drying (‘until evening’) is also essential. Pathogenic microbes can live in moisture that remains on skin, dying when the skin is eventually dried. Furthermore Numbers 19:13, 18-21 refers to the provision of ‘sprinkling’ the water, which indicates the need for running water, not stagnant water. Again this is a more effective means of cleansing, though more cumbersome... Did the average Israelite understand the significance of this preventive medical standard God imposed? No doubt he did not. However, God knew and in His wisdom cared for His people.”³⁸

³⁸ Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet. “Moses and Preventive Medicine,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September): 280-81.

III. From Kadesh Barnea to the Plains of Moab (20:1–36:13)

The first travel narrative of Israel's journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai (Ex. 13-19) begins positively with the defeat of Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea and Moses, Miriam singing songs of triumph, and the people believing in Moses as Yahweh's servant. It ends on a negative note, with the people's complaining about the lack of food and water. The second travel narrative of Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh (Num. 11-12) also begins on a positive note, with the cloud and fire leading the people to the Promised Land. Like the first, it ends on a negative note, with complaints from the people and Miriam, the lack of faith to enter the Promised Land, and the defeat by the Canaanites at Hormah.

The third narrative journey, described in this section, from Kadesh to the Transjordan (Num. 20-21), inverts the pattern of positive to negative of the first two journeys. It begins on a negative note of the death of Miriam and Aaron and Moses' unbelief, which excludes him from the Promised Land. It ends on a positive note, with victory at Hormah, where they had been previously defeated, further victories over Sihon and Og, and songs of victory. These victories and songs recall the first great victory over Egypt at the Red Sea. Thus, the journey into the Promised Land tells of tragedy that ends in triumph.³⁹

“The focus of the narratives in chs. 13-19 has been the sin of the people and the trouble caused by it. In chs. 20-21 this focus is still present, to be sure (20:2-13; 21:4-9), but it is beginning to shift to victories given by Yahweh as the people approach Canaan (21:1-3, 21-35). It should be remembered that these victories were given to the old generation that was under a death sentence in the wilderness. A new day is coming for the Israelites.”⁴⁰

Most of the 38 years of wandering in the wilderness has been skipped. Now the narrator skips to the end of their wanderings, to the last major rebellion of Israel against Yahweh before they entered the land. However, this also marks the transition from Israel being predominantly made up of the older generation to Israel being made up of the new, younger generation.

A. Moses' Sin and the Death of Miriam and Aaron (20:1-29)

This section tells of the death of Miriam and Aaron and of the failure of Moses as the nation's great leader. These stories emphasize the limitations of humans, no matter how great they are. The only truly great, dependable, and true leader is Yahweh. It is after this section that the failures of the current generation begin to fade into the background and the victories of the next generation due to their faithfulness begin to take prominence.

20:1 Miriam was a significant person in the Exodus story and as a prophetess to the people. Moses did not record the year of her death, but many commentators believe it was during the fortieth year.

20:2-8 The Israelites had already complained once before about the lack of water, when they first came out of Egypt, and Yahweh had miraculously provided them with water from a rock (Ex. 17:1-7). However, even though Yahweh had shown them that He could provide water whenever He wanted—not to mention all the other miracles He had done for them—they still responded with complaining and a lack of faith. After all these years and the judgments they had incurred, they still had learned nothing. As before, the people accused Yahweh of bringing them out into

³⁹ See Gordan J. Wenham. *Numbers*, pp. 166-167.

⁴⁰ Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*, p. 375.

the wilderness to kill them. The Hebrew word *vayyarev*, translated as “quarreling” or “contended,” carries a legal connotation of bringing litigation against someone. The people wanted to put Yahweh on trial for trying to kill them, but since they could not, they brought charges against Moses. Moses and Aaron went before Yahweh and pleaded for His help. Yahweh responded by telling them to take the staff of Yahweh and to then speak to the rock to bring forth water for the people.

20:9-13 But instead of obeying Yahweh exactly, Moses responded in anger and struck the rock twice. Unlike the times before, Moses’ response to the people was not supported by the same faith he had demonstrated in the previous account (Ex. 17:1-7) and throughout his life of leading the people. For Moses’ disobedience, Yahweh responded with judgment against Moses and Aaron.

Moses’ sin was his lack of faith and trust in Yahweh. Faith is the correct response to Yahweh’s word, whether it is promise or a command (Ps. 119:66). The opposite of faith is rebellion or disobedience (Deut. 9:23; 2 Kgs. 17:14). Thus, Moses’ failure to obey the instructions of Yahweh precisely was just as much of an act of unbelief as the people’s failure to trust Yahweh’s promises in taking the land of Canaan (Num. 14:11). Both were punished by exclusion from the land of promise. Because Aaron helped Moses, he received the same sentence.

Moses had also reacted in anger and lost control (Ps. 106:33). Moses misrepresented Yahweh by making the people think that Yahweh had lost control and was rashly acting out in anger. This misrepresentation of Yahweh is highlighted by the fact that despite the people’s quarreling and Moses’ sin, Yahweh still graciously provided water for the people.

Finally, Moses had disrespected the symbol of Yahweh’s presence, which was the rock.⁴¹ Beginning in Ex. 17:1-7, the rock is used throughout the First Testament as a metaphor of Yahweh’s power, protection, provision, and care for His people. Yahweh is continuously called the Rock (Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 18, 30-31; 2 Sam. 2:2; 22:32, 47; 23:3; Ps. 18:2, 31, 46; 19:14; 27:5; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 40:2, 9; 62:2, 6, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1; Isa. 17:10; 26:4; 30:29; 44:8; Hab. 1:12). By striking the rock in anger, Moses showed no respect for the symbol of Yahweh’s presence. Moses failed to *sanctify* Yahweh, which means he did not acknowledge publicly Yahweh’s purity and unapproachability.⁴² Yahweh judged Moses harshly because he was the leader over the people and represented Yahweh to them. Therefore, he was held to a greater standard.

“Moses’ anger complicated his unbelief. He was a faithful servant of God except on this occasion. If another person had committed this sin it might not have been so serious, but it was very serious because the man in Moses’ office committed it. God therefore shortened the term of Moses’ office as punishment. Moses would not bring the nation into the Promised Land (cf. 1 Sam. 13:14; 15:26). Leaders of God’s people lose their ability to lead when they cease to rely upon God and impede the manifestation of God’s power and holiness... In spite of Moses’ disobedience God still provided for the people by giving them water. God blesses people even through His disobedient servants. Nevertheless this in no way justifies a light view of sin. Moses experienced severe discipline for his unfaithfulness to God.”⁴³

⁴¹ See notes on Ex. 17:1-7 from the *Exodus Notes* at www.knowingthebible.net.

⁴² See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers* p. 170.

⁴³ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 59.

After 40 years of leading these people toward the Promised Land, Moses was forbidden from entering the land because he did not finish strong and persevere to the end. This is a warning to all Christians to persevere to the end. This is a reminder of the holiness of Yahweh and the sinfulness of humans (1 Cor. 10:4-12) and the need for faithful obedience (Heb. 3:7-4:13).

20:14-21 Israel had come to the southwestern side of Edom and needed to pass through their land in order to come up and around the Dead Sea and into the Transjordan region immediately east of the Jordan River. The Edomites were Israel's brothers because they were descendants of Esau (Gen. 25:23; 36:1). Moses sought permission from Edom to pass through their land and promised that they would not take anything from the land. Edom refused Israel passage, however, forcing them to take a longer journey around their territory. Because Israel was related to Edom and Edom was not a part of the Canaanite nations, Israel was not allowed to attack them. However, because Edom refused to allow Israel passage and would oppose Israel throughout history, Yahweh would eventually judge Edom (Obad. 10-14).

20:22-29 Aaron died on the first day of the fifth month in Israel's fortieth year, at the age of 123 years. But before Aaron died, Moses formally removed his brother's high priestly vestments and clothed Eleazer, Aaron's son, with them. Israel now had a new high priest.

"Aaron appears to have been a man of weak will whom the people rather easily influenced to compromise his obedience to God's word. Nevertheless he was an extremely important individual because of his ministry, his office, and his role as founder of the Aaronic priesthood. His great responsibilities before God were second only to his privileges under God."⁴⁴

"So ends the dark chapter. In it has been recorded the death of a prophetess, the critical sin of Moses and Aaron, the refusal of negotiation, the death of Aaron, and the mourning of the people. The chapter has emphasized the limitations of man—even God's leaders! Now with a brighter spotlight on the grace and glory of God, Numbers resumes its story of advance."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 62.

⁴⁵ Irving L. Jensen. *Numbers*, p. 87.



B. The Defeat of Arad, Sihon, and Og (21:1-35)

This section records a turning point in Israel's history, wherein they begin to trust Yahweh and thus begin to experience victory. As Numbers has so far shown that there is a direct correlation between lack of trust in Yahweh and defeat in life, so it now reveals a direct correlation between trust in Yahweh and victory in life.

21:1-3 Arad was a Canaanite city in the Negev about 17 miles south of Hebron. This was a huge turning point in Israel's history, and one begins to see the first sign of how this next generation was different from the previous. Rather than being afraid of the enemy, Israel sought to attack them and take back the Israelite prisoners that the king of Arad had taken. Not only this, but they also sought out Yahweh's permission to do so, which is unlike the previous generation. Yahweh granted them permission to go, and He gave them victory over Arad.

21:4-5 Israel then traveled southeast around the southern part of Edom. What is odd about this event is that even though people had previously shown faith in Yahweh and received from Him a great victory, they responded with complaining and a lack of faith. Most likely, the people complaining here are of the previous generation since, based on the previous passage and what is seen in the book of Joshua, these do not seem like the actions of the next generation.

21:6-7 The "fiery serpents" that Yahweh sent against the people most likely describe the burning of the venom after the people had been bitten. Perhaps Yahweh sent the serpents to demonstrate the nature of their rebellion and the chaos and darkness that they had become by constantly opposing Yahweh. Once bitten, the people cried out in repentance and begged for healing. The very God they had accused of not caring about them they now turned to because they knew deep down that He was really the only God who could help them and cared to help them.

21:8-9 Yahweh told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and lift it up on a pole and all those who looked at it would be healed. The question is, why did Yahweh choose the serpent, which was unclean (Lev. 11:41-42) and a symbol of chaos, evil, and rebellion (Gen. 3), as the object of their healing? Gordon J. Wenham states that the meaning is to be found in the principles of the sacrificial system. Animals were killed so that sinful humans may live. Blood pollutes people and items when spilled, but it is used to purify people when it comes from sacrifices. Dead animals pollute people, but the ashes of a dead heifer cleanse those who are unclean due to death. In each case, there is an inversion of unclean and clean. Those who were bitten by living fiery serpents were cured by dead serpents with the red hue of the bronze. This fits because red was the symbol of atonement and purification.⁴⁶

Also, when the Israelite made a sacrifice for atonement, there had to be physical contact with the laying on of hands on the sacrificial animal and with the purification offering, blood was physically sprinkled on the worshiper for the atonement of sins. Without physical contact, the ritual sacrifice of cleansing was ineffective. The same thing is seen here, when the Israelites had to physically look upon the bronzed serpent. Visual contact was all that was required.⁴⁷

Later, Jesus would use this symbol to refer to His own crucifixion (Jn. 3:14-15). Humans dying in sin are saved by the dead body of a man suspended on the cross. One appropriates Yahweh's healing power by believing in the Son of man (John 3:15).

⁴⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 177.

⁴⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 177.

There is a further meaning in connection with the bronzing of the serpent. In the ancient Near East and in the Bible, bronze was the symbol of judgment. By placing the dead bronzed serpent on the pole, Yahweh was showing that both the serpent and their sin had been judged. If they looked to that symbol of Yahweh condemning their sin and rebellion, then they would be healed. And just as the serpent (sin) was judged (bronze), so Jesus became our sin and was condemned to death on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21).

Even though Yahweh told Israel to destroy the bronze serpent on the pole, they preserved it anyway and later in their history turned it into an idol of worship. (2 Kgs. 18:4). It was King Hezekiah who finally destroyed it in obedience to Yahweh.

21:10-15 Israel then traveled up the eastern coast of the Dead Sea and the Jordan River through Moabite territory, into the territory of the Amorites. Archaeologists have not yet identified most of the sites mentioned here. It was in the valley of Zared that Yahweh commanded Israel to defeat King Sihon.

21:16-20 Before Israel went against Sihon, Yahweh provided water for them like He had done so many times before. The supposed lack of water was not due to Yahweh's lack of care for them but that He wanted them to come to Him for it.

21:21-32 Yahweh gave Israel victory over Sihon, and they captured his territory. The Kings Highway was a major road that traveled from Sinai to the north into Mesopotamia and ran along the eastern side of the Jordan River. The Amorites were the second major people group that Israel defeated after the Amalekites (Ex. 17).

“The term Amorite has various meanings in the OT: Canaanites generally (e.g., Gen. 15:16), inhabitants of the land west of the Jordan (e.g., Josh. 5:1), inhabitants of the regions of Judah (e.g., Josh. 10:5-6), inhabitants of the Negeb and the region to the southeast of the Dead Sea (e.g., Gen. 14:7), and very often, as here, the inhabitants east of the Jordan under the rule of Sihon and Og...”⁴⁸

21:33-35 The defeat of King Og of Bashan was Israel's third victory over the Canaanite people and their last until Joshua took lead over the nation of Israel.

Very little detail is given of the battle here because the battle was not epic. The only time there are epic battles in history or in movies is because the enemy is formidable. The enemy is equal in power or strength, and so defeating them is a challenge, and thus the battle is drawn out with many intense moments. However, here, with Yahweh fighting on Israel's behalf, Sihon and Og's armies were in no way a formidable enemy. Therefore, there was no epic, drawn-out battle because the enemy did not stand a chance against the sovereign King of creation. Most of the time the narrator gives very little detail to the battles in the Bible because they were not epic. If details are given, it is either to demonstrate the power of Yahweh in a unique way—like with the exodus (Ex. 14-15) and the battle of Jericho (Josh. 6)—or because Israel was not trusting in Yahweh and so the enemy does become formidable to Israel because Yahweh was no longer fighting with them (because of their lack of faith).

⁴⁸ Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*, pp. 418-19.



C. Balak and Balaam (22:1–24:25)

After the previous victories of Israel, the other nations began to fear that they would be next. This section covers the incident wherein Midian hired Balaam, the pagan diviner, to curse Israel. Because Midian feared Israel militarily, they chose to attack them spiritually. However, Yahweh showed Himself as superior in this area as well. The amount of space dedicated to Balaam in the book of Numbers shows that this was a significant event in the history of Israel.

22:1-6 Balak, king of the Moabites, upon hearing the news of the Israelites' victories as they moved up the Kings Highway, was filled with fear. Fearing that he could not defeat Israel, Balak turns to the occult and witchcraft to curse Israel.

“In the ancient Near East it was believed that an enemy could be combatted in two ways: with arms or by means of incantations, and if possible by means of a combination of the two. The incantations are based on the concept that a people and its deity constitute a unit; they seek to force, by means of various kinds of magic, the deity of the enemy to withhold his power from his people. Thus the enemy will be powerless and become an easy prey for the opponent. Moab does not dare use the first means, since Israel has already proven to be superior in military power to Sihon, whom Moab had been forced to acknowledge as their superior in the past. This leaves only the second means; they must find the kind of man who in the Euphrates-Tigris valley is called a *baru* (‘seer’). The *baru* belongs to the priestly class, and his specialty is ‘seeing’ what will happen on the basis of phenomena that escape the common person, but are found e.g., in the liver of a ritually slaughtered animal, or in the configuration of drops of oil on water, or in the stars, or in the shape of the clouds. Such *barus* were believed to be able to influence the will of the gods because of their secret knowledge and mysterious manipulations, and to force the gods to do, or not to do, a given thing.”⁴⁹

Balak sent for Balaam, a sorcerer who lived along the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. The fact that Balaam was brought from such a far distance suggests that he was a powerful and famous sorcerer.

“Balaam is the pagan counterpart to Moses the man of God. The recovery of prophetic texts of Balaam in Aramaic from the sixth century at Deir-’Allah in Jordan shows how very famous this man was in the ancient Near East, even centuries after his death.”⁵⁰

“Balaam’s name probably came from a Hebrew root meaning ‘destroyer’ or ‘devourer.’ His father’s name, Beor, apparently came from another word meaning ‘to burn,’ ‘eat off,’ or ‘destroy.’ The name of Balaam’s father suggests that he may have been a sorcerer and may have given Balaam his power as well as his name at birth. However, Balaam may have received his name later in life when his powers with the spirit world became known. In either case Balaam’s name suggests that he was a veteran conjurer of curses.”⁵¹

22:7-14 So the messengers of Balak went to Balaam and requested that he return with them to curse Israel as Balak had requested. Balaam’s response was that he would wait until night and seek out Yahweh’s instructions on the issue. Yahweh responded that night and made it clear that

⁴⁹ A. Noordtjij. *Numbers*, p. 199.

⁵⁰ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 887.

⁵¹ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 70.

Balaam was not to go with the men and was not to curse Israel because they belonged to Him. Obediently, Balaam told the messengers, and they returned to Balak with the message.

This event would make the reader think that Balaam was an obedient prophet of Yahweh, but the greater context of the story and the Bible makes it clear that this was not so. First, Balaam was offered fees for divination (Num. 22:7) and resorted to omens (Num. 24:1), practices that were abominations to Yahweh and were forbidden in Israel (Num. 23:23; Deut. 18:10; 1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Kgs. 17:17). Balaam constantly makes reference to money, and later in the Bible Balaam is condemned as a greedy prophet (Deut. 23:4-5; 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11). He also was the one who gave Balak the idea to entice Israel into sexual immorality later, in Num. 25 (Num. 31:8-16; Rev. 2:14).

“The Old Testament never calls Balaam a prophet or seer but a diviner (soothsayer; Josh. 13:22). This title never describes true prophets of Yahweh. God prohibited divination in Israel (Deut. 18:10-13), and the Israelites regarded it as a serious sin (1 Sam. 15:23; Ezek. 13:23; 2 Kings 17:17) as well as a mark of a false prophet (Ezek. 13:9; 22:28; Jer. 14:14). Balaam customarily sought omens (24:1) to understand the future by divination. He also had a reputation for being able to persuade the gods to take a particular course of action.”⁵²

Second, the conduct of the donkey prefigures the conduct of Balaam. Just as the angel drove the actions of the donkey, so Balak would drive the actions of Balaam. And just as Yahweh opened the donkey’s mouth, so He would put His words in Balaam’s mouth. Balaam is seen as no better than the donkey. In fact, the donkey is portrayed as more spiritually enlightened than Balaam when it could see the angel but Balaam could not.

Third, prophecy is seen as a gift throughout the Bible, but not as a sign of holiness, seen in the fact that false teachers may accurately foretell the future (Deut. 13:1-5). Many disobedient or ungodly men were able to prophecy throughout the Bible (1 Sam. 19:23-24; 1 Kgs. 13:11-32; John 11:51-52; Mark 9:38-39; Acts 9:13). The fact that he was to speak only the words that Yahweh put in his mouth emphasizes the inspiration of his oracles, not the holiness of his character. Just as the donkey was not holy, neither was Balaam. This makes the point that Yahweh can use anyone He chooses.

It is important to understand that Biblical narrators rarely comment on the character of a person. Character evaluation is implicit by the tenor of the stories. It is up to the reader to first understand the character and will of Yahweh, as seen in the Bible, to correctly understand the moral actions of the characters in the stories. Second, the reader must understand how the narrator writes and which devices he uses in order to understand his commentary on the characters and events in the stories.

22:15-21 Balak desperately sent more distinguished messengers and offered more money for Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam made it clear that he could only do what Yahweh gave him permission to do and said he would consult Yahweh again that night. Upon Balak’s second request, Yahweh gave Balaam permission to go to Balak, on the condition that he would say whatever Yahweh told him to say. The fact that Balaam would be allowed to say only what Yahweh told him focuses the reader’s attention on the oracles of Yahweh and not on Balaam.

22:22-27 The fact that Yahweh’s anger burned against Balaam on his way to Balak is confusing since Yahweh had given him permission to go. Some have suggested that Yahweh’s anger was in

⁵² Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 71.

response to the greed in Balaam's heart that is not mentioned here but later in 2 Pet. 2:15 and Jude 11. The contrast in these verses is that Balaam was incapable of discerning the presence of the angel, while the donkey could see. The fact that Yahweh got angry with him showed that he should have been able to sense the presence of the angel. Perhaps he did not because he was distracted by the greed in his heart—the reason Yahweh met him on the road to begin with. Strange actions in animals were seen as omens. As a great prophet, Balaam should have recognized that a deity had a message for him, but he did not see it. Instead he beat his donkey, which is an ungodly action in itself (Prov. 12:10).

Even though Moses is not in this story, the reader can already see that Moses is greater than Balaam by the fact that Moses spoke face to face with Yahweh (Ex. 33:11; Num. 12:8; Deut. 34:10) but Balaam could not even see an angel and did not even know that Yahweh was near. Balaam is dumber than his donkey.

22:28-35 The donkey speaking would have been as strange to the people of the Bible and ancient Near East as to people today. Yet Yahweh opened the mouth of the donkey in order to get Balaam's attention and to make a point about his ignorance in contrast to the awareness of the donkey. The fact that Balaam spoke to the donkey as if it were a normal and common thing could have been because spirits talked to him through animals on occasions before this. Yahweh opened Balaam's eyes to see who was really standing before him. The angel drawing his sword was symbolic of Yahweh's wrath against Balaam for acting as he did (Gen. 3:24; Ex. 12:12). After seeing and hearing the angel, Balaam fully understood the importance of saying only what Yahweh wanted him to say. The narrator shows that Balaam was trapped between the will of Yahweh and the will of Balak. This tension will be sustained throughout the entire narrative.

22:36-41 The irony here is that even though Balak was paying Balaam to curse Yahweh's chosen people, Balaam made it clear that he was going to say only what Yahweh told him to say. Balak took him to a cliff at Bamaoth Baal to overlook a quarter of the nation of Israel, hoping that Baal's presence here would cause Balaam to curse Israel and that the curse would have more power. *Bamaoth Baal* means "the high place of Baal." Baal was the high god of the Canaanites.

"Israel struggled with Baal and his worshipers from the beginning to the end of her national history. Baal worship was the most serious challenge and threat to the worship of Yahweh of all the pagan religions in the ancient Near East. This was true because some similarities and some vast differences existed between Baal and Yahweh."⁵³

23:1-5 Balaam offered up seven burnt offerings on seven different altars. The number seven, representing completion, was common in the ancient Near East. The number of altars and sacrifices also foreshadows the number of oracles that Yahweh would give to Balaam. The most important part here is that Yahweh put His words into the mouth of Balaam.

"Chapters 23 and 24 are two of the brightest chapters in the book of Numbers. Scores of wonderful things are said about Israel, mainly prophetic. The dark sins of the past were forgotten; only happy deliverance from Egypt was cited."⁵⁴

23:6-10 The first oracle recounts the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 13:16), wherein Yahweh promised to bless and curse those who bless and curse Israel and to make Israel into a great nation. This oracle shows that Yahweh has been honoring His promises. The nation

⁵³ Ralph L. Smith, "Baal," in *Biblical Illustrator* 10:2 (Winter 1984):15.

⁵⁴ Irving L. Jensen. *Numbers*, p. 99.

of Israel had become so big that Balaam could not even count the quarter of the nation that he could see from where he was standing.

“The account of Pharaoh’s first attempt [to suppress God’s blessing of Israel in Egypt] (Ex 1:11-14) is intended to show that ‘the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread’ (Ex 1:12). In his first oracle Balaam focused precisely on this point: ‘How can I curse those whom God had not cursed?’ (Nu 22[sic]:8), and he concluded by stressing the phenomenal growth of God’s people: ‘Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?’ (22[sic]:10).”⁵⁵

23:11-17 Balak was angry with Balaam when he heard the blessing come from Balaam’s mouth. Balak thought that perhaps the place they were standing was not spiritually powerful enough to invoke a curse.

23:18-24 It is again emphasized in this second oracle that Yahweh put His words in Balaam’s mouth despite the new location and sacrifices. The oracle begins by making the point that despite what Balak hopes to accomplish, Yahweh would not change His mind about blessing Israel. Also, Yahweh showed that despite Israel’s numerous rebellions and sins, He does not lie or change His mind; He would truly bless Israel in the way that He promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15; 22). Yahweh proclaimed that He has been with Israel from the beginning and would give them victories over their enemies (Gen. 49:9; Mic. 5:8).

23:25-30 Once again, Balak thought that the problem was with the location and so took Balaam to a new spot and offered new sacrifices.

24:1-9 In the third oracle, Balaam no longer spoke of Israel’s past but now began to see visions of the future of Israel and how Yahweh would bless them. Balaam could see the entire future nation of Israel and proclaimed the beauty of the tents as they surround the tabernacle. Balaam pictured Israel as a man carrying two buckets overflowing with water. Water was the source of life and material prosperity in the hot and barren ancient Near East.

“In an ironic reversal of the evil intended by Pharaoh’s order to cast the seed of Abraham into the river, Balaam’s third oracle uses the well-watered gardens that spread out along the banks of a river to speak of the abundance of Israel’s ‘seed.’ A literal reading of Balaam’s remark in Numbers 24:7 is ‘Their seed is in the abundant waters’... Thus what was once the intended means for the destruction of the promised seed, that is, the ‘abundant waters,’ has now become the poetic image of God’s faithfulness to his promise.”⁵⁶

In Num. 24:7, “Agag” was the title of the king of the Amalekites, Israel’s first victory over its enemies (Ex. 17). Balaam used Agag as a symbol of Israel’s enemies being defeated. Balaam saw the future king of Israel that would bring great victories and prosperity to Israel.

“It is clear from Numbers 23:24 that Balaam is speaking about the people of Israel and the exodus from Egypt. In 24:8, however, Balaam repeats the same line and applies it, using singular forms, to the king he has introduced in 24:7: ‘God brought him [singular] out of Egypt; he has the strength of a wild ox.’”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 407.

⁵⁶ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 407.

⁵⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 407.

“The writer’s purpose appears to be to view the reign of the future king in terms taken from God’s great acts of salvation in the past. The future is going to be like the past. What God did for Israel in the past is seen as a type of what he will do for them in the future when he sends his promised king.”⁵⁸

24:10-14 Balak became very angry with Balaam and sent him away without paying him. Balaam told Balak that he could only bless Israel as he had told him before all of this began. But before Balaam could leave, he unexpectedly went into another trance vision and began to speak. It is obvious here that Balak was not in control of what was happening.

24:15-19 This fourth oracle is perhaps the most powerful because it focuses on the coming Messiah. Though Israel at this time would not have seen this as the messiah but as a future king of Israel, it is clear from the rest of the First Testament that no earthly king could or would become what was spoken of the king of Israel here. Thus, these oracles would begin to look forward to a greater king, the messiah. Balaam prophesied that Israel would crush Moab and Edom in the future, who were an immediate symbol of those nations that opposed Yahweh.

Balaam saw the rising of a star out of Israel who would rule over Israel and all the nations. The star was a common symbol for a king in biblical and non-biblical ancient Near Eastern literature (Isa. 14:12; Ezek. 32:7; Rev. 22:16).⁵⁹ This star not only alludes to the promises of Yahweh to Abraham and Jacob (Gen. 49:8-12) but also foreshadows the coming messiah. This is probably one of the prophecies that led the magi to Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1-2). The image of the scepter is taken directly from Gen. 49:10, which also prophesied the coming messiah (Amos 1:5, 8; Ps. 45:6).

“If, in conclusion, we compare Balaam’s prophesy of the star that would come out of Jacob, and the scepter that would rise out of Israel, with the prediction of the patriarch Jacob, of the sceptre that should not depart from Judah, till the *Shiloh* came whom the nations would obey (Gen. xlix. 10), it is easy to observe that Balaam not only foretold more clearly the attitude of Israel to the nations of the world, and the victory of the kingdom of God over every hostile kingdom of the world; but that he also proclaimed the Bringer of Peace expected by Jacob at the end of the days to be a mighty ruler, whose sceptre would break in pieces and destroy all the enemies of the nation of God.”⁶⁰

“An interesting implication of the parallels presented here between the account of the birth of Moses in Exodus 2 and the announcement of the ‘star’ to arise from the family of Jacob in Numbers 24 is that Moses thus appears to be portrayed in these narratives as a prototype of the ‘star of Jacob.’ Such a view of Moses is consistent with the fact that elsewhere in the Pentateuch Moses is cast as a figure of the coming king (Deut. 33:5) and prophet (Deut. 18 and 34). This is also consistent with the fact that later biblical writers often saw in Moses a picture of the future Messiah (e.g., Hos 2:2).”⁶¹

24:20-25 Balaam again unexpectedly gave three final short oracles. The last three oracles deal with the defeat of Israel’s close and immediate enemies and then end with the defeat of other ancient Near Eastern enemies. The fifth oracle prophesied the destruction of the Amalekites, a

⁵⁸ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 407.

⁵⁹ Walter Riggans. *Numbers*, p. 186.

⁶⁰ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, 3:201.

⁶¹ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 406-7.

relentless military people who lived in southern Canaan and the Negev (Ex. 17:8-16; Num. 14:43-45; Jud. 6:3, 33). Saul and David both defeated the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:18; 30:17), but they were truly brought to an end in King Hezekiah's time, fulfilling this prophecy (1 Chr. 4:43).

The sixth oracle was against the Kenites, who lived southwest of the Dead Sea (1 Sam. 15:6; 27:10; 30:29), and the Asshurites, who lived in the northern Sinai (Gen. 25:3, 18; 2 Sam. 2:9). The Assyrians (Asshur) eventually defeated them during the 700s BC.

The seventh oracle was against Kittim (Cyprus) as representative of western powers (the Philistines, Greeks, Romans, and others at various times). Asshur probably refers to the Assyrians. Eber includes the western Semites descended from Eber (Gen. 10:21), who settled in Canaan. The destruction of these nations will not be fulfilled until the tribulation period of Revelation.

D. Israel's Idolatry and Sin with the Moabite Women (25:1-18)

This section records the end of the old generation and the beginning of the new generation. It is also the final rebellion of Israel in the wilderness before they enter the land of Canaan. The Bible often startles its readers by juxtaposing the greatest of moments with the darkest of moments in Israel's history: the creation of the world (Gen. 1-2) followed by the fall of humanity (Gen. 3), the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19-24) followed by the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32), and the ordination of Aaron as high priest (Lev. 8-9) followed by the death of his two sons (Lev. 10). Now, after the great blessings of Yahweh (Num. 22-24), Israel falls into great sexual immorality (Num. 25).

This chapter also marks a transition from the Israelites' idolatry with the golden calf of Egypt (Ex. 32) to the god Baal of the Canaanites, who would become the bane of Israel throughout their history as a nation and would lead eventually to their exile from the land (2 Kgs. 17:7-41; 25:8-30). Baal worship also introduces sexual immoralities into the Israelites' worship.

“The chapter is placed between the Balaam oracles and the second census account for theological and literary reasons. In relation to the Balaam oracles it shows that, even while God was blessing Israel through Balaam on the heights of Peor, below on the plains of Moab Israel was showing its weak and sinful character. The parallel between this incident and that of the Torah at Sinai and the golden calf (Exod. 20–32) is obvious.”⁶²

25:1-3 The Moabites and the Midianites joined together to entice and destroy Israel. Because Midian knew that they could not defeat the God of Israel militarily and spiritually, they decided to attack Israel morally and personally. Where Balaam's cursing of Israel had failed, he now counseled these two nations to seduce Israel sexually through their religious practices (Num. 31:16; Rev. 2:14). The gods of these two nations and the surrounding nations promoted orgies, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, sex with statues of the gods themselves, and child sacrifices as not only morally right but as a required form of worship. In Num. 25:3 the word “joined” or “yoked” in the Hebrew carries the idea of a sexual initiation that joins one to the pagan god. Where Israel was supposed to be yoked with Yahweh only, they now prostituted themselves to another god (Ex. 19:3-6; Deut. 6:4-9).

“It was the assumption of the [Baal Peor] cult that the fertility of people, cattle, and crops depended on the sexual linkage of a god and goddess. By imitating this union of the gods, men and women would seek to induce the gods to grant a greater measure of fertility. Such cultic practices were common in all of the nations surrounding the Israelites.”⁶³

25:4-5 The Israelites' blatant disregard for Yahweh, for what He had done for them, and for the covenant they had with Him caused His anger to burn against them in the manifestation of a plague. Yahweh commanded Moses that the leaders of this rebellion be executed in order to spare the people from the plague.

25:6-9 Until now, this sexual rebellion had taken place in the Moabite and Midianite camps. Now Zimri (Num. 25:14) showed his contempt for Yahweh by bringing a Midianite temple prostitute into the camp of Israel and performing a sexual ritual with her before the tabernacle, Moses, and the people. The narrator makes a strong contrast between the Israelites who were in

⁶² Timothy R. Ashley. *The Book of Numbers*, p. 515.

⁶³ B. Maarsingh. *Numbers: A Practical Commentary*, p. 92.

the tabernacle courtyard weeping over their nation's sin and the callused rebellion of Zimri as he brought a prostitute into the tabernacle courtyard.

“We may observe that while priests were always male in Israel, priests could be women in the pagan religions that surrounded Israel. In fact, the sexually centered religions of Canaan would have catered to women in their priesthood. Women priests were so very closely tied to the sexual outrages of Baal and Asherah worship that the very notion of a women [sic] priest conjured up images of sexual worship. Perhaps this is the principal reason that Israel had no women priests.”⁶⁴

Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, brought an end to this act of sexual immorality by driving a javelin simultaneously through Zimri and the Moabite woman while they were having sex. The priests were responsible for representing Yahweh before the people and protecting the holiness of Israel. One of the ways they were to protect the holiness of the tabernacle was by killing anyone who entered in such a way that brought defilement to the tabernacle. Phinehas was acting as a righteous warrior of Yahweh, removing and atoning for sin and defilement before it could destroy the camp of Israel.

“The point was that in joining the sexual frenzies of the sacrificial feasts of Baal, the man and his priestess-partner now act to transform the worship of the Lord into the type of sexual rites that were the mode of Canaan. Had this outrage not been stopped, there could never have been true worship in the Holy Place again. They were making the place of entrance into a bordello, the entrance of the meeting of God and man into a trysting spot.”⁶⁵

25:10-15 Yahweh rewarded Phinehas by making a covenant with him—that his descendants would enjoy peace and that they would be high priests forever (Ps. 106:30-31; Jud. 20:18). Yahweh specifically states that Phinehas's actions made atonement for the Israelites. Normally, the death of an animal made atonement for the sins of a person (Lev. 1:4; 4:20; 5:16). Here, the sinners themselves were put to death so that an animal sacrifice was not necessary.

25:16-18 After the Midianites' attempts to destroy Israel through the cursings of Balaam and now by seducing Israel into uniting itself sexually with Baal, Yahweh commanded that Moses attack and put down the Midianites responsible for this immoral invasion on Israel.

“This incident, as the others in which Israel departed from God, shows the inveterate sinfulness of humans even when God blesses us greatly. It also demonstrates the holiness of God, the seriousness of sin in that it destroys fellowship with God, and the necessity of atonement by blood to restore sinners to fellowship with God.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 917.

⁶⁵ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 917.

⁶⁶ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 85.

E. Second Numbering of Israel and Inheritance (26:1–27:23)

The focus now changes from the older, disobedient generation of Israel who died in the wilderness to the younger, obedient generation who would inherit the Promised Land. With this new generation comes the need for a new census. The covenantal promises of Yahweh to Abraham may be delayed by the sins of Israel, but they cannot be thwarted.

26:1-4 Though Yahweh said to count all the men of fighting age, He did not specify the census was for the purpose of fighting. Based on the context, the purpose for the census was also to determine the size of the tribes for their inheritance as they entered the land (Num. 26:52-56). It seems that the 24,000 Israelites who died in the most recent plague (Num. 25:9) were the last of the older generation; only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb remained.

26:5-56 One can see that, overall, the size of the nation stayed the same. Because of their disobedience and rebellion in the wilderness, Yahweh did not bless them with fruitfulness. Yet at the same time, the mercy of Yahweh is revealed in that they also had not tremendously *decreased* in size despite all of their rebellions against Him. Reuben, Simeon, Gad, Ephraim, and Naphtali were the only tribes that did not increase in number. Reuben and Gad may be because of their support of Korah in his rebellion (Num. 16). The tribe that lost the most people in the forty years was Simeon. Zimri was a Simeonite (Num. 25:14), so most likely the Simeonites followed Zimri in his rebellion and were the majority of the 24,000 who were killed in the plague. Once again, Simeon receives punishment for their sins (Gen. 34:24-31; 49:5-7), whereas Levi finds redemption and is blessed because of their repentance (Ex. 32:25-29; Num. 3:40-51). The reason for Ephraim and Naphtali's decrease in numbers is not clear.

Tribe	First Census	Second Census	Difference
Reuben	46,500	43,730	-2,770
Simeon	59,300	22,200	-37,100
Gad	46,650	40,500	-5,150
Judah	74,600	76,500	+1,900
Issachar	54,400	64,300	+9,900
Zebulun	57,400	60,500	+3,100
Ephraim	40,500	32,500	-8,000
Manasseh	32,200	52,700	+20,900
Benjamin	35,400	45,600	+10,200
Dan	62,700	64,400	+1,700
Asher	41,500	53,400	+11,900
Naphtali	53,400	45,400	-8,000
Totals	603,550	601,730	-1,820

26:57-65 As before, Moses also counted the Levites one month old and older. The Levites grew in number from 22,000 in the first census to 23,000.

27:1-4 Normally in the ancient Near East, when the father died, only the sons divided up the land, the oldest receiving a double portion. The daughter would receive a significant gift called a *dowry*, which would go to her husband when she was married off. The dowry usually did not include land since she would be receiving land when she married her husband. However, wealthy fathers might give her slave girls and cities (Gen. 29:24, 29; Judg. 1:13-15; 1 Kgs. 9:16). The daughters received their inheritances from the father at her marriage, while the sons received their inheritance from their father upon his death.

Upon Zelophehad's death, he had no sons to give his land to. This presented a problem because his name and inheritance was now lost at his death. Concerned for their father's name and land inheritance, Zelophehad's daughters went to Moses requesting that they could receive the inheritance. They emphasized that his death was a natural one and not the result of judgment for the rebellion of Korah. The daughters' desire to inherit land in the Promised Land shows their faith in Yahweh that He would bring them into the land that He had promised. This is contrasted with the previous generation that did not believe Yahweh could give them the land and so wanted to keep their children from the land inheritance.

27:5-11 Not knowing how to deal with this unique situation, Moses showed his faith by taking the matter to Yahweh. Yahweh declared that if a man had no sons, then his inheritance was to go to the daughters, then his brothers, then to his uncles, and then to his closest relatives. Unlike the other gods, Yahweh showed that He values women and that they have an inheritance as well. This also shows that keeping the land in the clan and tribe was important to Yahweh. Later, Yahweh would allow only the daughters to inherit their father's inheritance if they married within the tribe.

27:12-23 Yahweh had forbidden Moses from entering the Promised Land (Num. 20:1-13), but he was allowed to view it from Mount Nebo in the Abarim mountain range, which ran along the southeastern side of the Jordan River (Deut. 32:48-52). Unlike the people, Moses did not rebel against Yahweh or try to enter the land on his own. Instead, he asked Yahweh to appoint a successor who was godly and would shepherd the people. Yahweh appointed Joshua to be anointed as Moses' successor and to lead the nation of Israel into the Promised Land.

"The portrayal of Moses' passing his authority (splendor or majesty) over to Joshua and Joshua's reception of the Spirit is noticeably similar to the transition of prophetic office from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings 2:7-15. It appears that the writer of the book of Kings has intentionally worked some of these themes into his narrative to draw out the comparison.... The type of leadership exhibited by Moses and Joshua is the same as that of Elijah and Elisha. It is a leadership that is guided by the Spirit of God."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, pp. 412-13.

F. The Festivals and Making Vows (28:1–30:16)

The fact that Yahweh repeats in a way the laws concerning festivals and vows shows how important these are. Given the nature of the older generation, it is unlikely that they had practiced these festivals or passed them on.

28:1-29:39 The sacrifices and festivals were covered in Leviticus 1-6 and 23. Here, however, Yahweh focuses more on how frequently these sacrifices were to be made and the minimum number required in a year. The sacrifices are arranged by the most frequent to the least frequent. Every year the priests would have to sacrifice 113 bulls, 32 rams, and 1,086 lambs and offer more than a ton of flour and a thousand bottles of oil and wine.

“The real key to successful conquest of Canaan and happy living within its borders was *continual fellowship with God*. Hence it was that God at this time presented to the new generation by way of Moses a finalized and complete set of regulations for offerings, most of which had already been given at Sinai. Their observance would encourage an intimate worship of God by the people in the land (cf. Exod. 23:14-17; 29:38-42; 31:12-17; Lev. 23; Num. 25:1-12).”⁶⁸

“As we, the modern readers of Numbers, think scripturally, this overwhelming emphasis on sacrificial worship has one intent: to cause each reader to think of the enormity of the offense of our sin against the holiness of God, thus driving the repentant sinner to the foot of the Cross. All sacrifices—whether of the morning or evening, of Sabbath or New Moon—have their ultimate meaning in the death the Savior died. Apart from his death, these sacrifices were just the killing of animals and the burning of their flesh with attendant ceremonies. After his death, sacrifices such as these are redundant—indeed, offensive—for they would suggest that something was needed in addition to the Savior’s death. But before his death, these sacrifices were the very means God gave his people in love to help them face the enormity of their sin, the reality of their need for his grace, and—in some mysterious way—to point them to the coming cross of Savior Jesus.”⁶⁹

30:1-16 Leviticus 27 covered how vows were to be made. Yahweh shows between these two passages that He neither forbids nor encourages vows but does take them seriously. The question though is what happened when a man objected to the vow of a woman who was under his headship? Yahweh states that an unmarried girl’s submission to her father and a married woman’s submission to her husband was greater than any vow that she would take.

A man could annul his daughter’s or wife’s vow upon hearing it, but if he did not, it would remain in force. Like the man’s vow, the vow of a widowed or divorced woman was unbreakable. This section clarifies the important principle that one should not regard self-imposed religious obligations as more important than Yahweh-given duties.

“The matter of vowing a vow or making a pledge was taken very seriously in Israel. If the foundation of the faith was the immovable trustworthiness of God, no wonder a premium was put on being true to one’s promises in general.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Irving L. Jensen. *Numbers*, pp. 110-11.

⁶⁹ Ronald B. Allen. “Numbers.” In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 949.

⁷⁰ B. Maarsingh. *Numbers: A Practical Commentary*, p. 106.

G. War Against Midian (31:1-54)

In fulfillment of Yahweh's command to go to war against the Midianites (Num. 25:16-18), Moses prepared the nation of Israel for war. That this chapter deals more with the aftermath of the battle than the battle itself suggests that Moses was more interested in instructing Israel how they were to deal with the spoils of war and cleanse themselves for when they entered into war in the land of Canaan.

31:1-5 Yahweh commanded Moses to gather the armies of Israel in order to do battle with the Midianites. The Midianites were a larger confederation of tribes, associated with various smaller groups such as the Ishmaelites (Gen. 37:28; Jdg. 8:22, 24), the Moabites (Num. 22:4, 7), the Amalekites (Jdg. 6:3, 33), and Ephah (Gen. 25:4; Is. 60:6). They roamed through the arid deserts of Sinai, the Negeb, and Transjordan. It was the Midianites associated with Moab who were targeted for vengeance (Num. 22; 25), not the whole group.⁷¹ The fact that the Midianites existed after this battle suggests that only the Midianite tribe responsible for seducing Israel was killed.

31:6-13 The fact that no military leader is mentioned but that Phinehas the priest is prominent reinforces that this was not a military campaign but a holy war. Israel defeated the Midianites and brought the spoils back to Eleazar the high priest, not to Moses or Joshua their political and military leaders. The Israelites killed every male including Balaam who had counseled the Midianites to seduce Israel.

31:14-18 Normally, Yahweh had the women spared in battle, but because these women were responsible for the seduction of Israel, only the virgins were spared. Israel had been punished first (Num. 25); now it was time for the people of the other nations who had joined Israel to be punished.

31:19-24 After the soldiers' contact with dead bodies, they were to remove themselves from the camp for seven days and ritually purify themselves from their uncleanness. Everything that was not combustible was to be purified with fire, the symbol of judgment.

31:25-54 First, the Israelites were to pay a tithe to the priest and to the Levites. After that, the spoils were to be divided equally among the soldiers who had fought and the people who had not fought. No special privilege was given to soldiers, for they served the greater community, not themselves.

⁷¹ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 209.

H. The Boundaries and Allotment of Canaan (32:1–34:29)

Moses prepared Israel for entering the land of Canaan by giving them the borders within which they were to live and assigning men who would divide the land among the twelve tribes.

32:1-5 The tribe of Reuben and Gad seemed to have a large number of cattle, and, upon seeing the fertile land to the east of the Jordan River, they asked Moses if they could stay and settle in this part of the land. Though Yahweh had given this land to Israel in His covenant, He had also commanded Israel to drive out all the Canaanites from the entire land and settle west of the Jordan River (Num. 34). The problem was that though the land did technically belong to Israel, it was not where Yahweh wanted them to live. Their desires for what they wanted were greater than what Yahweh wanted.

32:6-15 Moses immediately recognized that, first, they were not trusting Yahweh that what He had to offer them was better than what they desired and, second, that this could be seen as a lack of interest in helping the other tribes take the land and could lead to disunity. He warned them not to make the same mistake that their parents made when they refused to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13-14). There are specific allusions in Moses' response (Num. 32:6-15) to Israel's refusal to enter the Promised Land. Even though their refusal did not technically look as bad as that of their parents, it was still disobedience and would result in the same consequences.

32:16-42 When Reuben and Gad agreed to help the other tribes conquer the land of Canaan before settling on the east side of the Jordan River, Moses agreed to let them settle there. Despite their disobedience here, Reuben and Gad did follow through with their promise to help conquer the land of Canaan (Josh. 4:12-13, 22). Later, after this deal was struck, half of the tribe of Manasseh also followed and settled on the east side of the Jordan River.

In the short term, this may seem like an insignificant act of disobedience that the author is overstating, but in the long term, it seriously and negatively affected Israel as a nation. Having a river divide the tribes of Israel disrupted the unity of Israel (Josh. 22). Over time, Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh became isolated and disconnected from the other tribes, and so mistrust developed on both sides. Likewise, Israel was not as strong, and the eastern side of the Jordan River had no natural defenses; thus Israel was always weak on the east side and so was easily invaded and eventually conquered (2 Kgs. 15:29). Yahweh's desire was for Israel to be unified, and what looked like good and legitimate land to Reuben and Gad eventually contributed to their and the nation's downfall. Yet the enlargement of the Israelite territory that resulted from their action is an example of Yahweh's providence, bringing good out of human small thinking and sin.

33:1-49 Yahweh gave a review of Israel's deliverance from Egypt to their arrival at Canaan. The purpose of this review and list of places is a testament to the faithfulness of Yahweh, that He had done what He said He would do: make them into a great nation and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

“But there is more to the list than this: it summarizes the main themes of the books of Exodus and Numbers. It reminds the reader of the great obstacles that the nation has overcome in escaping from Egypt and crossing the Sinai desert. If God has helped Israel thus far, then he will surely enable them to reach their goal, the land of Canaan. This glance back at history is, therefore, a fitting prelude to the last group of laws in the book (33:50-36:13) which deal

explicitly with the land. God's past dealings with Israel are a guarantee that they will soon be in a position to implement these laws in the land promised to the patriarchs."⁷²

This is clearly a selective list, for 42 places are mentioned. Eighteen of the places are not mentioned in other lists of travel in the Bible. And four places mentioned in the other lists are not recorded here. The focus seems to be on those places that would help Israel recognize their failure to learn from their past and Yahweh's continual faithfulness in spite of Israel's failures.

33:50-56 The whole book of Numbers looks forward to Israel's taking and settling of the Promised Land. Thus, it is fitting that the book closes with laws that explicitly deal with the occupation of the land. Yahweh reminded Israel that they were to clear the land of all of its inhabitants and make it a holy land belonging to Him. The repetition of "all" emphasizes the importance of their completely clearing the land of all of its wickedness. Yahweh warned Israel of what would happen to them if they did not obey Him: The Canaanites would corrupt them morally and then enslave them, and Yahweh would have to deal with them in the same way that He had dealt with the Egyptians and Amorites.

34:1-5 The borders given here are not the same as those promised to Abraham, which encompassed a much greater territory (Gen. 15:18-21). Instead, this was the land that Israel was to live in when they *first* entered the Promised Land. If they were obedient, then Yahweh would expand their borders to what He had promised Abraham.

34:16-29 Yahweh selected twelve men—one from each tribe that would settle in Canaan on the western side of the Jordan River—to assist Eleazer, the son of Aaron, and Joshua in dividing the land among the ten tribes.

⁷² Gordon J. Wenham. *Numbers*, p. 242.



I. Levitical Cities and Cities of Refuge (35:1-34)

The previous chapter dealt with the general boundaries of the land for the twelve tribes of Israel. This chapter deals with the specific cities in which the tribe of Levi was assigned to live and minister.

35:1-8 The Levites received four towns for each of the twelve tribes (Josh. 21). However, these cities were scattered throughout the land based on population rather than on tribal regions. Most of the Israelites lived no more than ten miles from a Levitical town. The Levites living in these cities were responsible for teaching the Law and counseling the Israelites.

35:9-34 Six of these Levitical towns were also cities of refuge. In a world without police and prisons, these cities helped maintain justice in the land. If someone was guilty of murder, it fell to the victim's closest relative (the avenger of blood) to seek out the murderer and to execute him according to the Mosaic Law. The murderer, seeking safety from the avenger of blood, would flee to one of these cities to be tried by the Levites living there. If they found the person guilty of premeditated murder, then they would remove him from the city and hand him over to the avenger of blood for execution. If the person was guilty of manslaughter, then he was required to live in the city until he or the high priest died (Deut. 19:1-13; Josh. 20:1-9). As long as he lived in the city, he was safe from the avenger of blood, but being trapped in the city was also his consequence for taking a life. This practice ensured that there was justice for both parties. In the ancient Near East, the avenger of blood would often kill the murderer and their family without ever considering the case.

When the high priest died, his blood became atonement for the murderer, who was then set free from the confines of the city. Likewise, the avenger of blood was not allowed to touch him, or he would be considered guilty of murder.

J. Inheritance Case of Zelophehad's Daughters Revisited (36:1-13)

In closing the book of Numbers on the topic of land allotment, the author revisits the case of Zelophehad's daughters and discusses the concern of what would happen to the tribal land if they married outside of the tribe.

36:1-4 The men of Manasseh are concerned that if women can inherit land from their father, then this could become a problem if they marry outside of the family. This is not an issue with a man since the family into which he is born is where he stays for the rest of his life. However, a woman belongs to whatever family and tribe her husband belongs to. This is a legitimate concern since Yahweh has made it clear to Israel that the land of a family staying within a tribe is important to Him.

36:5-13 In order to protect the desire of Yahweh and the interest of a tribe, Moses ruled that any woman who inherits her father's land because she has no brothers is required to marry within the tribe in order to keep the land within the tribe. If she marries outside of the tribe, then she loses the inheritance of her father.

The daughters of Zelophehad show their obedience to Yahweh and marry within the tribe of Manasseh in order to keep their father's inheritance within the tribe.

"The reason this passage is placed here rather than with chapter 27 is twofold. First, it concerns the issue of tribal allotments, which is the focus of these last chapters of Numbers. Second, it is customary for large sections of the Hebrew Bible, including whole books, to conclude on a positive note."⁷³

"Rather than being haphazardly separated and/or appended to the end of the book, Num 27:1-11 and 36:1-13 form an inclusio that frames the deliberately unfinished story of the second generation. Zelophehad's daughters exemplified the faith that tenaciously clung to the Lord despite adverse circumstances. In contrast to the shortsightedness and concomitant unbelief of the first generation, the daughters' eschatological outlook provided the necessary impetus for obeying the stipulations of the covenant."⁷⁴

"The Book of Numbers closes with the positive example of obedience that these women provided for Israel. This book that is so full of negative examples of unbelief and disobedience ends optimistically. With people like Zelophehad's daughters in Israel, the future of the nation looked promising."⁷⁵

⁷³ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 422.

⁷⁴ Dean R. Ulrich, "The Framing Function of the Narratives about Zelophehad's Daughters," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:4 (December 1998): 538.

⁷⁵ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Numbers*, p. 109.

Conclusion

Numbers records the failures of Israel—the failure to know Yahweh, trust Him, and obey Him. Because they failed to trust Yahweh and believe that He had their best interests in mind, they failed to experience life to the fullest and partake of His blessings. Instead, their disobedience led to misery and eventually death, just as it did for Adam and all those before them who failed to obey.

However, Numbers also shows the grace and mercy of Yahweh. Despite all their rebellions, He still honored His promises to Israel and did not exact the full punishment on Israel that was His right as their God and according to the Mosaic covenant that they made with Him. Yahweh's greatest desire for Israel was for them to know Him and to bless them. Yahweh is seen as a father who desires the best for his children, who is also willing to teach and discipline them in order to strengthen their character and to keep them from sinning, which destroys lives.

“Perhaps the most prominent theme is that of the gracious providence of the Lord in caring for all of Israel's needs—militarily, physically, nutritionally and spiritually—in spite of constant rebellions by the people, both leadership and rank and file.”⁷⁶

Numbers ends with Israel in the Plains of Moab and ready to enter the Promised Land north of the Dead Sea. Numbers is followed by the book of Deuteronomy, which records three speeches given by Moses to the new generation of Israel before they enter the Promised Land. These speeches bring two prominent messages: Learn from your parents' mistakes and remember how Yahweh was able to take care of you in every way. The book of Joshua records Israel's entrance into the Promised Land and how they experienced more success because they applied Moses' lessons from Deuteronomy. This shows that, despite Israel's disobedience in the wilderness, they were not able to hinder the will of Yahweh, only postpone it. In the end, He brought them to the Promised Land, and they entered just as He said they would.

⁷⁶ Walter Riggans. *Numbers*, p. 2.

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